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~ A ~
Diamond
for the
Broken Duke

Falling for the Windhams

HAZEL LINWOOD

A DIAMOND FOR THE BROKEN DUKE

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

FALLING FOR THE WINDHAMS

BOOK III



HAZEL LINWOOD



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BEFORE YOU START READING...

Here is a prequel chapter that will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“I am not the man you once knew... You will learn to accept that!”

Levi was never meant to be a Duke. Yet now his new duties and his dire financial situation, force him to do the impossible: forget Catherine and find a bride of convenience...

Catherine refuses to settle for anything less than true love, even if it means embracing spinsterhood. So when she overhears Levi insulting her for denying her own dowry, she hatches a plan to sabotage his every move...

When Catherine wrecks his prospects, Levi rises to the challenge. Until the cracks in his cold and distant facade make her desperate to see more of the man hiding underneath. Even if it brings her own ruin...

CHAPTER I



Levi looked on as his oldest friend, Michael, stood in the center of the entrance hall, gazing around with a sense of awe on his face.

“I must confess, Levi, I did not know your father’s estate was so incredibly grand!”

Levi frowned as he too cast an eye around the hallway, taking in the marble staircase, the ornate fireplace, and the portraits of dukes of the past adorning the walls, all the way up to the high ceiling. “There are many grander houses, I am sure. And, anyway, it is my estate now,” he said quietly. “Come, let us go into the drawing room. I have ordered tea.”

Michael followed Levi down a corridor, and they settled into easy chairs opposite one another, then waited until the maid had served them tea and left the room before they resumed their conversation.

“It has been a long time, my friend,” Michael mused. “I think it has been more than a year since I last saw you. It must have been at the ball, a year or so after my wedding.”

Levi nodded. "It feels like a lifetime ago, I must confess."

"I was sorry to hear of your father's passing while Constance and I were on our honeymoon," Michael said slowly.

Levi looked at him and let out a small sigh. "It was not a surprise, you know. He had been ill for some time. In a way, it was rather a blessing. He was not a man who enjoyed being stuck in bed all day. Those last few months were a great trial to him."

There was silence between the two men for a moment before Michael spoke again. "But your brother's loss must have been much more of a shock."

"I cannot deny that it was," Levi agreed. "We were not close, you know. He was raised to be a duke and to keep his distance, even from those in his own family."

Michael nodded and gave a wry smile. "I can certainly identify with that. You have met Constance's brother Neil, have you not?"

"Indeed," Levi said. "Although only briefly. But yes, Theodore was rather similar in character to the Duke of Whitewell, from what I could gather. And, of course, he was expecting to be the Duke of Coltfield until his old age, not to die suddenly before he had even reached his prime."

Levi heard the crack in his own voice as he spoke. In front of anyone other than Michael, he would have been embarrassed to show his feelings, but he had known Michael far too long

for any such dissemblance, and he knew that his friend would see right through him if he tried to hide anything.

“At least the illness was brief,” Michael mused.

“Yes,” Levi agreed. “It is a relief to know that he did not suffer too much in those final days. The disease of his lungs came on quickly, and his passing followed soon after. At least, he did not leave behind a wife and children to grieve him. That is something to be thankful for.”

“But he has left you behind to grieve,” Michael said quietly. “And more, it seems.” He glanced around the room again. “I cannot believe I have never visited you here in all the years we have known each other.”

Levi shrugged. “I have not chosen to live here for many years. The estate is too far away from town, too far away from the life I chose to live, before... well, before everything changed. When I still had a choice.”

Michael leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his tea. “It must have been a shock to you, to inherit the dukedom.”

Levi paused and met his friend’s gaze. “I never wanted it, you know. I am not like one of those younger brothers who secretly resent the older ones for the title and the position they are to inherit. Far from it. I was relieved not to have to live that life. And now, well, I have no other option but to live it, until my dying day.”

“There must be some benefits to it, though?” Michael frowned. “You seem rather maudlin, not your usual jovial self at all. Is there nothing that I can say to cheer you? I know I should have visited you sooner, but I kept writing to make sure that you were all right, and barely received a response. I assumed, therefore, that you wanted to be left alone.”

Levi sighed again, a deep sigh that felt as if it came from his bones. “I apologize for not replying to your letters or inviting you here sooner. But the affairs of the estate have kept me busier than you can imagine over this past year, since Theodore’s passing.”

“Well, I have the perfect suggestion that might cheer you up,” Michael said in a jolly tone that sounded more than a little forced to Levi’s ears.

Levi wished for a moment that his friend would stop trying to cheer him, stop trying to persuade him that everything was going to be fine, when Levi knew in his heart that it was unlikely to be so. And as for him not being his usual jovial self... well, how could that be when he had so much to worry about?

Levi looked at his friend and thought that it was unlikely that he could come up with anything that would take his mind off his many troubles, but he did not want to seem churlish.

“Tell me your plan,” he said instead, trying to sound interested.

“There is to be a grand ball next week at Neil and Lydia’s house, Sandhill Estate,” Michael said. “We would love to see

you there. It has been a long time since you have been to a ball, I think?”

“I am not sure that I have the time,” Levi said, hesitating a little.

He knew that he could make himself available if he really wanted to, but what would be the point? Going to a ball would only force him to remember the life he had once had.

Michael huffed. “Levi, I am sad to see you so down. It is not like you at all. What makes you so pessimistic?”

“I simply have not had much time for such pursuits over the last couple of years, and I do not think that I will in the future either,” Levi replied.

He knew that his friend barely recognized this version of himself, but perhaps it was better that Michael got used to who he was now, sooner rather than later.

“Can you really see no way that you can try to enjoy your new position, and to make the most of being a duke? Surely it cannot be that bad.”

Levi frowned. “I know on the surface that I must seem churlish,” he said slowly. “And, of course, many people would envy me for my position and all this apparent wealth and splendor. But the truth is that my father left a massive debt on the estate. Theodore barely had time to do anything about it before he fell ill, and so now, it is all down to me to try and

resolve it. And I have tried, heaven knows I have tried. But to no avail.”

He looked around the drawing room, at the plush furniture and the sculptures and paintings, and felt a wave of sadness at the realization that one day, he might have to try to sell them all to the highest bidder. The shame of it!

“I am sorry to hear that, Levi,” Michael said. “I know that being a duke is not always as easy as people might think.”

Levi set his teacup down on the table. “And I never even wanted it. I was not brought up for it. My father pretty much ignored me for most of my childhood, you know. He preferred to pour all his energy into preparing Theodore to be the perfect duke when the time came.”

He let out a low groan of despair. “I know nothing about business, or investments, or any of those things that noblemen are supposed to know about. And although I have not made things worse, everything I have tried over the last year has made no difference. The debt is not paid off. I have not even made a dent in it.”

He looked up at Michael. “I have been wracking my brains for weeks, for months, to think of an answer to the problem. And there is only one solution, as far as I can see. I must marry, and by that, I mean I must marry a young lady with a dowry. That is the only way to clear the debt in one go, and look towards the future.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “I would never have thought that you would say such a thing, Levi, if I am perfectly honest.”

“And I confess it is not something I thought I would ever say, or consider, but what choice do I have? I cannot marry for love now. It is best if I just accept that and give up on any foolish romantic hopes I may have had in the past. I must look for a lady with a large dowry, to help me save my father’s estate. There is no other option.”

Michael glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and smiled a little wryly. “Well, it is after four o’clock, Levi. I think that kind of news warrants something a little stronger than tea, don’t you?”

Levi smiled weakly, despite himself. “I think so. There is some brandy over there. Perhaps you could see to it?”

Michael nodded and crossed the room, then poured two glasses of brandy from a decanter on the sideboard. He returned and handed one to Levi, then the two men clinked their glasses together.

“Perhaps it is not as bleak as you think it is, Levi,” Michael said. “If you agree to come to the ball, then maybe you will meet a young lady who has a fortune, and with whom you might form an affectionate attachment. Stranger things have happened, you know. I do not think you should give up on happiness entirely.”

Levi sighed and took a sip of his brandy, feeling the familiar burn trickling down his throat. “I do not dare to hope that such a thing is possible, Michael. It is better to be pragmatic, to see it as a business deal. But I will come to the ball all the same. It is the place one must go to meet young ladies, that much I do recognize and accept.”

Michael groaned. “Gosh, you are resigned to it, aren’t you?” He sipped his own drink for a moment, before speaking again. “Well, you never know. Even if you are not looking for love, it might be your lucky night!”



Catherine took a sip of her lemonade and looked around the ballroom. She felt a stab of sadness as she remembered how excited she had been during her first Season. Each and every ball had felt like an adventure, bringing with it the hope of excitement, of romance. But as each year had passed since her debut, that sense of excitement had begun to fade. And now as she looked around the ballroom of her brother’s fine home, filled with some of the most important and influential people of the *ton*, she felt scarcely even a flicker of excitement.

“These balls are all the same, aren’t they,” she said with a sigh, turning to her friend, Isabel, who was standing next to her.

“I suppose they are,” Isabel agreed, raising an eyebrow. “There is always music and dancing and smiles and laughter. But I suspect that is not quite what you were getting at, my dear?”

Catherine chuckled, in spite of herself. “I suppose it is different for you, as a married woman. You have found your prize.” She glanced across the room to where Ambrose, the Earl of Hertford, was standing.

Isabel and Ambrose had been married for a few years now and already had one child, with another on the way.

“And I am sure that you will find yours, Catherine.” Isabel placed a reassuring hand on her friend’s arm. “It is not too late, you know.”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “It will be soon, though! I shall be twenty-three on my next birthday. You know as well as I do that I am creeping towards spinsterhood at a steady pace, and time slows for no man, or woman either!”

Isabel huffed. “We have had this conversation countless times. You have many more years ahead of you before there should be any talk of giving up hope.”

Catherine looked over at the dance floor, which was thronged with couples making their way through an upbeat country dance. “But have you noticed that hardly any gentlemen ever ask me to dance anymore?”

“Well, that will be because of your ridiculous stubbornness about your dowry,” a masculine voice interjected.

Catherine looked up to see her brother, Neil, standing close by. He was not as severe in demeanor as he had once been before he had met his wife, Lydia, but he still was an impressive presence as he stood there in his finest clothes, observing all that was going on in the ballroom of his grand home at Sandhill Estate.

“Oh, Neil, I did not see you coming,” Catherine said, a little snappily. She had been in a bad mood already, and she sensed a lecture coming from her brother that was unlikely to improve things.

“I have not been eavesdropping, don’t you worry. I only heard the last thing you said, about gentlemen not asking you to dance anymore.”

Catherine shrugged. “Well, I am right, aren’t I? No one has looked twice at me all evening. And it is because they know that I have no dowry, which proves the point I have been trying to make for at least a year now. They were only interested in me for my title and my money. And now that there is no money attached to my hand, no one is the least bit interested.”

Neil sighed. “I wish you would not be so insistent about this, Catherine. You have made your point. Yes, there are some fortune hunters out there, but I would never have allowed you to marry one of them. It is possible for you to have a dowry and a love match, you know.”

Catherine huffed in frustration. “I do not believe it, and tonight proves my point. When money mudds the water, how can you tell if a gentleman’s affections are genuine? They pay no attention to young ladies who have no money, which says it all. I have almost given up hope.”

She folded her arms and stared across the room, aware that she was probably coming across as sulky and childish, but not caring much at that moment.

All she had ever wanted was to fall in love and have a happy family life of her own. And she had seen her brother Neil find happiness with Lydia, and her sister Constance fall in love with Michael. But happiness seemed to elude her. Yet, she was determined not to settle for anything but true love. And if that

meant never marrying at all, and remaining a spinster forever, then so be it.

It looked as though her siblings were going to have plenty of children between them, so perhaps her duties as a devoted aunt would have to be enough to give her a sense of fulfillment in life.

Next to her, Neil sighed. “Well, I have made my thoughts very clear on this, Catherine. It is, of course, up to you, but I think you should have a dowry, and the money is there if you change your mind. But I know that you will have it your way, as always.”

She nodded. “I will, indeed.”

She turned away and surveyed the ballroom, looking for something, anything, to divert her attention from this very vexing subject.

Her eyes fell upon a tall man with long, dark, wavy hair that fell almost to his shoulders. He was speaking to Michael on the other side of the room, near the refreshments table. There was something very familiar about him, but Catherine could not quite work out where she had seen him before.

Constance appeared next to her and followed her gaze. “Oh, Levi is here!” she said happily. “I was not sure if he would come. Michael said he has been rather down lately.”

“Levi,” Catherine repeated as she struggled to remember where she recognized him from. “Oh, Levi Galpin! He is a

good friend of Michael's, of course! I met him at your wedding. But we have not seen much of him in Society as of late?"

Constance shook her head. "He is the Duke of Coltfoot now, since his brother died rather suddenly last year, and Michael told me that there are a great many troubles plaguing him on the estate. He has not been in Society for some time. But now that he is here, let us go and greet him!"

Constance took her sister's arm and led her across the room to where the two men stood.

CHAPTER 2



“It feels a little clinical, looking around the room like this and talking about money,” Levi said with a frown as he followed Michael’s gaze towards a group of young ladies standing together at the foot of the large staircase that led down from the grand entrance hall into the ballroom.

Michael rolled his eyes. “Well, it was you who said you wanted to marry a young lady with a healthy dowry. I am simply trying to help you identify her. And Miss Elizabeth Talbot, who is standing over there in the lemon-yellow gown, apparently has a very large dowry, being the only daughter of Lord Talbot. She is considered to be one of the most desirable young ladies of the Season.”

Levi forced himself to look at where the young lady in question was chatting with her friends. There was something rather self-conscious about the way she was standing. No doubt she knew that many eyes would be on her. Levi did not know whether to feel sorry for her or not. No doubt many of her peers thought that she was in an enviable position, but surely being the focus of everyone’s attention must also be rather disturbing.

“Do you think she is pretty?” Michael asked, lowering his voice a little.

“Michael!” Levi admonished his friend. “We should not talk of her like that. And, anyway, that is irrelevant.”

“Of course, it is not irrelevant. Surely there must be some attraction, to complement this business deal that you now seem to be viewing marriage as.”

“Oh, I don’t know!” Levi huffed. “The whole thing makes me feel rather strange. But I suppose I should get it over and done with and start to meet these young ladies. Perhaps you would be so kind as to introduce me to Miss Talbot?”

Michael nodded, and they were just about to cross the room to where Miss Talbot stood with her friends when Michael’s wife, Constance, appeared next to them with her sister Catherine. Levi remembered her instantly. They had met at Constance and Michael’s wedding, and then again at a ball about a year later. He had thought then that she was beautiful, and as he looked at her now, smiling up at him, he thought no different. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

“Ah, Constance!” Michael said, greeting his wife with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek. “I have been wondering where you have gone, and I am not at all surprised to see you with your sister.” He turned to Levi. “Levi, you must remember Lady Catherine, Constance’s sister? I am sure that you met at our wedding.”

Levi nodded, the memory of their first meeting vivid in his mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago, when he had been a carefree young man celebrating his friend’s marriage. He had

scarcely allowed himself to think of it since, with everything that he had had to worry about in the following months.

“Lady Catherine.” Levi bowed. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

She looked at him with surprising frankness, then smiled. “It is a pleasure to see you again too, Your Grace.”

Levi winced a little at her use of his title. Of course, it was quite correct, but he still had not gotten used to it fully, and every time he heard it, it jarred him a little.

Her brown eyes were gentle and kind as she held his gaze. “I was very sorry to hear of the passing of your brother,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Thank you. It was a shock, I must confess.”

Levi found that he could not tear his gaze away from her. He remembered now, when they had met at Michael and Constance’s wedding, how struck he had been with her beauty, and of course, that remained unchanged.

She was tall, lean and elegant, and her gown fitted her perfectly, skimming her figure. Her dark blonde hair was swept up onto the top of her head, with a few tendrils loose around her face. There was a quiet confidence about her that he remembered finding enchanting when he had met her, and he was sure that he would continue to do so today.

When he had met her before, it had seemed as if she had been surrounded by suitors, but he had always sensed that she had been looking for something deeper, more real than those encounters in a ballroom. And here she was, still unmarried, and still as captivating as ever.

Without even really thinking about what he was doing, he decided on his next course of action. “Lady Catherine, it is a long time since I have been to a ball. Do you think you could honor me with a dance, even if I am most terribly out of practice?”

She chuckled at his request. “Of course, Your Grace. And I promise not to cry if you step on my toes.”

He smiled and took her arm, avoiding Michael’s amused gaze as he did so, and led her across the room to the dance floor, where the orchestra was just about to begin playing a waltz.

Levi felt something fluttering in his chest as he took her in his arms. He tried his hardest to suppress it, even though as he looked at her, the memories came flooding back to him of the night they had first met, at the wedding, and how much he had wanted to dance with her then, but how fate had stolen him away when a message had arrived, telling him of his father’s ill health. He had thought of her since and remembered her vivacious spirit. But something now made him hold back. There was much more at stake now that he was a duke.

“It is very pleasant to see you back in Society, Your Grace,” Catherine said as they began to move around the dance floor.

Levi frowned. "I have been far too busy, I'm afraid, for balls and parties."

A look of confusion crossed Catherine's face, and he realized that his tone had been rather sharp, but he did not know what to say next, so he waited for her response, feeling rather hollow inside.

"I am sure that the duties of a duke are far beyond what a lady such as I would ever understand," she said crisply. "But I confess that I had thought at one point that you may have been traveling abroad," she said, a little hesitantly.

Levi scoffed. "In my previous life, that would very likely have been the reason for my absence, but now, I cannot hope to find much time for travel in the future." He paused and looked at her closely, wondering for a moment what it would feel like to be her, at the mercy of the marriage market and the rhythm and flow of the Seasons of the *ton*. "Have you had much chance to travel, Lady Catherine?"

She shook her head. "No, although I would love to see the world!" Her face broke into a smile. "When we were children, we had a large book of maps in the nursery, and we used to pour over it, imagining what all these places would be like. Italy, Greece, all those fascinating places, and then lands further away still, where there are great deserts of sand or expanses of ice. Can you imagine anything more thrilling?"

Levi could not help but smile at her enthusiasm. "And do you imagine that one day you might have the chance to travel to such places?"

Catherine looked into his eyes. “I hope that one day, when I am married, I might see the world with my husband.” She looked at him through long eyelashes. “Although I suppose that you will think that is a rather naive thing to say, but it is what I hope, nevertheless.”

“Well, you had better hope that your husband has nothing better to do than to travel around the world with his new wife!” Levi said, once again noting the unintended sharpness in his voice. “I suspect that most gentlemen who might find themselves lucky enough to marry you would also have to dedicate some of their time to the more tedious pursuits of running an estate.”

The worst thing was, he thought as he watched her digesting what he had said, that a couple of years ago, before his life had changed forever, he would have agreed with her. He could think of nothing better than traveling the world with a beautiful and charming woman like Lady Catherine at his side. But he knew that now he could not allow himself to think that way.

“Your Grace, it is sad that you do not see any chances for adventure in your future,” Catherine said, giving him a rather mischievous smile.

Her smile almost knocked the wind out of him, her beauty had such an impact. And Levi could not help but respond to her in kind, returning her smile.

“Perhaps I have had enough adventures to last me a lifetime already,” he replied.

He knew that he was teasing her, pushing the boundaries of propriety, but somehow he could not stop himself. Her vivacious nature was drawing him in all over again.

“And I am sure that some of those adventures are not fit to be discussed in a ballroom, Your Grace,” she bit back, a hint of a challenge in her brown eyes. He felt her body stiffen slightly in his arms as they moved together around the dance floor.

Levi flinched at her forthright comment. How could he respond to that without stepping outside the bounds of propriety?

Fortunately, though, Catherine spoke again, saving him from the need to respond to her. “It is a shame that you do not see love and marriage as an adventure in itself, Your Grace.”

“I am not sure that love and marriage should go together in the same sentence if I am perfectly honest, Lady Catherine,” he replied.

He knew he should not be saying such things to her, and on so short an acquaintance too, but he felt as if he had known her for much longer. And somehow, he could not stop himself from being honest with her, even though he thought that his words were probably not the ones she wanted to hear.

She seemed to flinch a little at his response. “I am rather sad that you think that, Your Grace, but I confess I am not surprised. Many men, it seems, feel the same way.”

“And perhaps many young ladies do too,” Levi retorted. “There are just not many who would dare to admit it out loud.”

“I think that young ladies are far less likely to use men for their own ends than the other way around!” Catherine replied rather hotly, her cheeks darkening a little at the turn that their conversation was taking.

Levi paused and took a breath. This was not the kind of conversation they should be having while dancing a waltz. He found that his gaze was drawn to her eyes, her face, no matter what he said or did. He tried to control himself a little better before he ended up saying something that he might regret later.

“Lady Catherine, forgive me,” he said slowly. “I am sure there are more pleasant things we could talk about, don’t you agree?”

Catherine cocked her head to the side and looked at him a little coyly. “More pleasant than marriage? Or love?”

“Come, Lady Catherine,” he cajoled, unable to resist returning her smile. “Let us talk of the weather instead, or perhaps the number of couples on the dance floor, or the shocking state of the roads. I think we are far more likely to agree on those topics.”

She gave a tiny shrug of her slim shoulders. “If you prefer it, Your Grace. You start, though. That kind of small talk always leaves me rather at a loss for words.”

He could not help but laugh at her wit as he twirled her around and the dance drew to a close. But he knew as he looked at her, her pretty face a little flushed from the exertion of the dance, that he must not think of her that way. She was just the kind of woman he would have chosen as a wife, all those years ago, but now, everything had changed, and he would have to choose a different kind of young lady to share his life with. One with money, for starters.

He bowed stiffly in her direction as they left the dance floor. “Lady Catherine, thank you for the dance. I enjoyed your company very much.”

He found that he could not even bear to meet her eyes before he turned and walked away. How much he had changed in just the space of just two years. He reflected as he made his way towards the refreshments table for a much-desired glass of wine that he hardly recognized himself now—his life and outlook had changed so much.

He could no longer afford to think with his heart. It was his head that would have to be in charge from now on, no matter how captivating he found Lady Catherine Windham to be.



Catherine stood stock still, watching Levi walk away from her. She could hardly tear her eyes away from him. It was hard to believe how much he had transformed since the time she had first met him at Constance’s wedding.

How carefree he had seemed then, and how vivacious! And now, he was stiff and cold, and he seemed almost to be carrying a sense of anger with him too, at how his life had turned out. She felt a little sorry for him, at that moment. She

knew from her brother the onerous nature of managing a dukedom, and she did not envy either man the task, but she did wonder at how miserable it seemed to have made Levi. He was not the same man at all.

And yet, there was a hint of something there in his eyes, and around the edges of his smile, that reminded her of the man she had met two years ago before he had been dragged away into a pit of bad news and responsibilities. There was a glimmer of something that was still there, in his playful smile. But she had seen the moment when he had shut it down and become cold and formal again.

As she turned to make her way back to her sister and brother, she saw something lying on the floor. It was a white cloth. She stooped to pick it up and saw that it was a gentleman's handkerchief, with the initials L.G. embroidered on it in a fine crimson thread. It must be Levi's.

She held it tightly in her hand, debating inwardly for a few moments what she should do with it.

Of course, she would return it. She should go and find him now and give it back to him. And, perhaps, in the moment of thanking her for her kindness, something of the real Levi would shine through the cold façade that he seemed to be hiding behind.

Catherine did not like to think that this new version of Levi was the real thing. No, it could not be. It scarcely seemed possible that he could have changed so much in such a short period of time. She found herself desperately hoping that she was right.

CHAPTER 3



Levi took a deep breath, feeling a surge of gratitude to be out here on the balcony in the cool night air. The ballroom was stifling, and after such a long time away from Society, he was rather surprised at how overwhelming he was finding the experience. He had never felt anxious or stressed at a ball before in his life, and now here he was, grateful for a quiet moment away from the crowd so that he could gather his thoughts in peace.

Michael stood next to him, a glass of wine in his hand. “So, how was your dance with Catherine?” he asked a little slyly.

Levi rolled his eyes. Was there to be no escape? “It was perfectly pleasant,” he replied flatly.

“Perfectly pleasant!” Michael exclaimed. “Good Lord, man, that is faint praise, indeed, for a woman such as Lady Catherine.

Levi frowned. “She is a very nice young lady,” he said but stopped after that. There was nothing more to say.

“I seem to remember a time when you thought a good deal more of her than that,” Michael said teasingly. “When you first met her at the wedding, you could not keep your eyes off her. We all thought—”

Levi raised a hand to stop him. He had heard quite enough. “I can scarcely even remember the encounter that you mention, Michael,” he replied sharply. “And there was certainly no chance of... well, whatever you are implying that you all thought was going to happen. She is not the woman for me.”

“But you were infatuated with her!” Michael ploughed on.

“Please, do not speak another word of it,” Levi insisted. “You are causing me great embarrassment. She is very pretty, yes, of course she is. As Constance’s sister, how could she not be? But that is all there is to it.”

Michael frowned. “What has changed your mind?”

Levi was about to protest that nothing had changed his mind, that he thought she was as beautiful as ever, but he held back. How could he indulge these thoughts when he had to forget everything he had once believed and become a different man, now that his life and his responsibilities had changed forever?

There was no point in going back over old ground. Instead, he would address the present situation.

“She is convinced that she will be able to travel the world with her husband when she finds him,” he said. “And I tried to tell her that if she marries a man with a title—as she almost

certainly will, given her own elevated position in Society—then he will not be at liberty to gad about the place with her for months on end if he has an estate to run.”

Michael chuckled. “And I imagine she did not take kindly to your bursting her bubble like that.”

Levi shook his head. “Indeed, she did not,” he replied. “And then, she began to prattle on about love. Really, Michael, she is rather childish for her age. She has the naivety of a debutante, even though she has a good few Seasons under her belt.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “That is rather a harsh thing to say, don’t you think, my friend?”

Levi felt a twinge of guilt, but he pushed it aside. He could not have all of Catherine’s extended family fantasizing about an attachment between them that had never and could never exist.

“She needs to be careful,” Levi said. “If she carries on like this, she will never find a match. She will end up being a spinster aunt to all of Neil and Constance’s children, and never find the happiness she is so clearly desperate for.”

Michael sighed. “We all just want her to be happy.”

“Well, I have heard rumors that she has no dowry, and I think that this may well be affecting her chances when it comes to finding a husband. And in all honesty,” Levi continued, “that is another reason why I could not consider her as a possible wife, regardless of all the other reasons. I need to marry a

woman who will bring with her the money I need to save the estate. There is no point in me wasting my time with young ladies who have nothing to offer in that respect.”

He paused for a moment, glancing up at the inky-black night sky above. “And the most important thing, Michael, is that Lady Catherine is looking for love. And that is not something I can give to her, or to any other young lady. I will never have the time or the energy to dedicate myself to romance, and all that nonsense, while I have a dukedom to run.”

Michael stared at him. “Levi, you are much changed, I must confess,” he said, a little sadly. “I did not think that I would ever hear you speak of marriage in such a cold, business-like manner. But I shall not try to persuade you of any alternative views. I can see that your mind is made up, and I cannot force you to agree with me on this.”

“Indeed, you cannot,” Levi murmured, then turned to reach for his glass of wine, which he had left on the stone wall of the balcony. And at that moment, his eyes fell on Catherine, who was walking towards them, with a handkerchief in her hands. His handkerchief, if he was not very much mistaken.



Catherine had come out onto the balcony to look for Levi and seen him almost instantly, standing chatting with Michael. His height made him stand out amongst every other person present, and she could not help but notice his impressive stature and the strength in his broad shoulders. Somehow, she could not help but look at him. She had approached slowly, intending to speak to him immediately, but once she had heard her name being mentioned, she had stepped back and hidden behind a pillar. She had heard almost every word he had spoken about her.

Childish! Desperate! How dare he say such things about her. And to suggest that she would end up a spinster because her ideas of marriage were so ridiculous. She may well have had those thoughts herself, but it stunned her most horribly to hear them coming from another's mouth, particularly his.

She had been wringing his handkerchief between her hands as she listened to his words, and now she wished she had never even bothered to pick it up. How foolish she had been to want to speak to him some more. There was nothing to uncover, no hidden depths in the Duke's personality or character that he was keeping concealed.

No, he was just the same as every other gentleman she had met, in her many Seasons in Society. Those many Seasons that should, according to him, have made her more cynical and more prepared to see marriage as nothing more than a business deal.

Well, she never would. She had made that promise to herself a long time ago.

And, he had revealed his true motives for reentering Society. He was looking for a rich wife to get him out of trouble. All he was interested in was a young lady's dowry, just like all the other gentlemen.

Catherine resolved, at that moment, that she was not going to let him get away with it. Any other lady would have run off crying, her heart broken to hear a gentleman—nay, a duke—speak so harshly of her. But not Catherine. She refused to give in to it. Her anger was stronger than her disappointment. She would face him and not let his insults go unpunished.

She took a deep breath, gripped the handkerchief tightly in her hands, and moved from behind the pillar, then walked purposefully towards Levi and Michael. She saw the look of horror on his face when he saw her. She hoped that his heart was seized with panic at the thought that she might have overheard him.

His face changed after a split second, and he gave her a neutral, polite smile. “Lady Catherine, how nice to see you again.”

She bobbed a small curtsy, determined to do everything properly throughout this conversation. No one would be able to accuse her of impropriety, no matter how angry she was.

“I was just coming to return this to you, Your Grace,” she said, handing him the handkerchief with a smile. “And to say what a pleasure it was to see you again in Society after your long absence. I do hope that you find what it is you are looking for, now that you are amongst us again.”

She gave him a long look and saw, with a certain feeling of satisfaction, that he at least had the decency to look embarrassed. He broke her gaze and looked at the floor.

“Well, I shall take my leave now and go and find Constance and Isabel, but I do look forward to our next meeting, Your Grace.” She turned to Michael. “I will see you later, Michael,” she added, then turned away and left the balcony, walking purposefully back into the ballroom.

She would make the Duke pay for his insults, there was no doubt about it. She was not quite sure yet how she would go about it, but she was not going to let him get away with speaking about her in such a dismissive and cruel way.



Levi watched Catherine walking away, a sinking feeling in his chest. He could tell that she had not meant a word of what she had said. Her smile had not reached her eyes, and there was something about the look in her eyes that had made him uncomfortable. He had a rather ominous feeling that there was trouble ahead, and it was the last thing in the world that he needed, with everything else he had to worry about.

“Well, it was nice of her to bring your handkerchief back,” Michael said, looking at him hopefully.

“Please, Michael, will you admit defeat on this, once and for all?” Levi sighed. “She brought my handkerchief back because she is a well-brought-up young lady who thinks about other people. It means nothing. That is the end of it.” He picked up his wine glass and drained it, then set it down on the stone wall with a thud. “Come on, let’s go inside. I want another drink.”

Michael nodded and followed him back into the ballroom.

Levi felt the heat of the room hitting him in the face as soon as they entered. He fought his way through the crowd to the refreshments table and managed to get hold of a glass of wine for himself and one for Michael. Then, they found a place to stand where they could survey everything that was going on, without being caught too much in the throng.

“Well, Levi, since you will not have Catherine, we must find you someone else,” Michael said, looking around the room. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He stalked off to where a group of young ladies were gathered with their mothers, and probably their aunties and grandmothers and goodness knows who else.

Levi looked away. He was not particularly enjoying this new quest to find a wife, even though it had only just started, and it was his own idea. But he forced himself to look around the room again. He would make no progress if he stared at the floor and drank rather too much wine than was good for him.

He regretted looking up almost immediately, though, for across the room, he caught Catherine staring at him. She did not smile, and he saw something like coldness in her eyes.

Once again, he forced himself to look away. He was sure that trouble was on the horizon. It seemed to him almost as if Catherine was plotting something, although he had no idea what could be on her mind. He would face up to it, though, and tackle whatever problems came his way head-on.

CHAPTER 4



Levi entered the large dining room and joined the melee as everyone looked for their seats. It had been quite some time since he had been to a dinner party, and he had felt a flicker of excitement when the invitation from Lord and Lady Rivers had arrived.

In the old days, before his father and brother had died, and all the troubles of the estate had fallen on his shoulders, he had had very much enjoyed attending dinner parties. They offered better opportunities for conversation, he had often thought, in comparison with balls, and he had always been happy to be invited.

But since he had vanished off to his estate in Coltfoot, the invitations had dried up. Of course, when he had first become the Duke, everyone had wanted to pay court to him, but when it had become clear that he was not going to respond to anyone's invitations, or even return to town very often, people had gradually given up on him.

He was sure that he had Michael to thank for this invitation, in fact. He knew that Michael and Constance were good friends with Lord and Lady Rivers, and they often attended parties at one another's houses.

He glanced around the table, feeling a pang of regret that Michael and Constance were not here tonight. They had planned to attend, but their child was a little unwell, and neither were prepared to leave him alone for the whole evening, so they had remained at home. But Lydia and Neil were in attendance. Levi could see them sitting down at the far end of the table, looking very pleased to be seated next to one another. He tried to resist the surge of envy in his heart as he watched them together.

Theirs was a true love match. He thought how lucky they had been to find one another, and how lucky Neil was, as the Duke of Whitewell, to be able to marry for love rather than seek his fortune through a marital alliance, as he was going to have to do himself.

He settled into his seat and immediately noticed that Catherine was seated on the opposite side of the table, a little distance away. How could he not notice her, he thought as he watched her laugh and smile as she chatted with one of Lord Rivers' younger sons.

He forced himself to look away and turned to his left to see a young lady sitting down next to him, to whom he had already been introduced in the drawing room before dinner.

"Lady Adeline!" he greeted her with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. "How delighted I am that we are sitting next to one another."

She gave a tight smile. "Your Grace, I am very happy too," she said, her hands demurely placed in her lap.

Levi stole a few glances at her as she sat there quietly. He did not want to seem too obvious, but he noticed her finely embroidered gown and the perfect arrangement of her pale blonde hair. Her eyes were an icy blue, and he knew she was what many other gentlemen would call beautiful, but somehow, he could not see any sparkle in her.

But he knew that he could not think about young ladies like this anymore. Sparkle was not what he was looking for, now.

The soup was served, and after taking a few spoonfuls, which he barely tasted, he turned to Lady Adeline. "Tell me, Lady Adeline, is this your first Season out in Society?"

Her pretty face creased into a frown, and he knew immediately that he had said something wrong.

"No, indeed, Your Grace," she replied, not meeting his eyes. "It is four years now since I made my debut." She flushed a little and stared into her soup bowl.

Levi cursed himself inwardly. He had meant it to be a compliment, he supposed, but of course, these young ladies were sensitive about having had several Seasons since their debut without succeeding in securing a match. How could he have been so foolish?

He resolved to try again, wracking his brain to think of something even slightly intelligent or interesting to say.

"Have you traveled far to get to the party tonight?" He winced inwardly as the words came out. A more banal question he

could not possibly have thought of.

His mind flew back to the moment on the dance floor at the ball when he had teased Catherine about how they should be talking about the state of the roads rather than the meaning of love. Would he ever find that level of easy banter with another young lady again?

Lady Adeline, however, appeared on more comfortable ground with this question. “We live a little way outside of the city, near the river,” she replied. “My father agreed for us to come in the carriage this evening, so we had a very comfortable journey.” She paused and looked at him for a moment. “Did you come by carriage too?”

He shook his head. “I have been staying with my good friend Michael, the Marquess of Vaughan, and his wife, at their house in town. They were planning on coming this evening, but their child is unwell, so they stayed home.” He wondered if this was a boring tale, but she seemed interested, so he carried on. “I could have come in my own carriage, of course, but I preferred to arrive on horseback.”

“Oh, how dreadful for you!” Lady Adeline said, her pretty nose wrinkling up. “I must confess that I do not like horses at all. I would hate to have to ride to a party such as this. Thank goodness I am not a gentleman, and would never be expected to!”

Levi frowned. He loved his horse, almost more than he loved some of his friends, and he had enjoyed the ride this evening immensely, but clearly talking about horses was not going to help him find any common ground with Lady Adeline. So, he was back to square one, trying to think of another topic of conversation.

Levi heard a soft chuckle coming from across the table. He looked up and saw that it had come from Catherine. She was hiding her mouth with a napkin but he could see from the look in her eyes that she found the whole situation most amusing. He stared at her, trying to fathom why she would laugh at him, but then dragged his eyes away from her and returned his attention to Lady Adeline.

“And tell me, Lady Adeline, do you go to many dinner parties? I must confess, they are quite my favorite way to spend an evening.”

Levi finished his soup while Lady Adeline told him a long story about a party she had gone to the previous week, and some scandal with a butler and the hostess that had been uncovered during the course of the evening, and he did his very best to listen and nod in all the right places, but he could not avoid noticing that the whole thing felt rather like hard work.

But hard work he must persevere with, he thought, if he was going to achieve his goal. And yet, the whole time, he felt Catherine’s eyes on him, and the sensation was most unsettling.



Catherine felt herself moving from amusement to irritation as she watched Levi’s efforts to get to know Lady Adeline. From the very beginning, it should have been quite obvious that they had nothing in common. But clearly, he was determined to keep trying.

She'd had to try very hard to stifle her laugh when Lady Adeline had said that she did not like horses. The look on Levi's face had been priceless. Catherine remembered from when they had conversed before, at Constance's wedding, that horses were his great passion. He was a lover of riding and hunting and spoke of his own horse the way some other men spoke of their friends or their siblings. It should have been clear to Levi then that he and Lady Adeline would never be a good match.

But still, he persevered, and now he was listening to her tell a long story about some scandal with someone's servants, and he looked as if he had never heard anything so dull in all his life. And poor Lady Adeline seemed oblivious to his boredom. Catherine could scarcely bear to watch.

She had promised herself, though, that night in the ballroom, that she would keep a close eye on Levi and not allow him to entrap any of her friends. Lady Adeline had a very large dowry, and most of the gentlemen of the *ton* knew this, which was one of the reasons why she was so popular. But Catherine knew her well – they had debuted together – and she knew that her friend was looking for a love match.

She resolved that she would not allow Levi to mislead her. When the soup had been cleared away, and some of the guests stood up to take the air on the balcony, Catherine resolved to act.

She got up and went over to the other side of the table to speak to Lady Adeline. She would tell her what Levi's strategy was and make sure that her friend was not taken in by it. She would not allow him to hurt any young ladies with his conniving!

“Lady Adeline! I feel that I have barely seen you all evening, and we have not had a proper chat for an age! Won’t you join me on the balcony for a few moments between courses so that we can chat?”

Lady Adeline looked up at her and smiled, then nodded enthusiastically. Perhaps she was grateful to be rescued from the painfully stilted conversation with Levi. “I should be delighted to join you, Lady Catherine,” she said, rising from her seat with perfect grace and elegance, then taking Catherine’s arm as they crossed the room towards the open door leading to the balcony.



Levi watched as Lady Adeline and Catherine walked onto the balcony. That rather ominous feeling he had experienced on the night of the ball returned to him, but he tried his best to dismiss it.

What trouble could someone like Catherine cause for him, really? He tried to convince himself that there was nothing to worry about.

He sat quietly for a moment or two, sipping his wine and wondering whether he should try to strike up a conversation with another young lady, or if that would only jeopardize his efforts with Lady Adeline if she were to return to the table and see him focusing his attention on someone else. He was immensely grateful, then, to look up and see Neil approaching and dropping down into the seat next to him.

“I have scarcely seen you for months, Coltfoot!” Neil said jovially, reaching out and shaking his hand. “Apart from at our ball, when I barely had time to speak to anyone, of course!

You will have all that to look forward to, you know, once you are a little more established in your new position.”

Levi frowned. “Oh, gosh, I had not thought about throwing balls and all those kinds of things,” he said. “I suppose I shall have to get used to the idea, though.”

“Indeed, you shall,” Neil replied affably. “It is all part of what is expected of you when you become a duke, whether you like it or not.”

Levi tried his best not to grimace. Hosting large parties was not something he was especially looking forward to, even if he knew that it was what Society expected of him.

Neil took a sip of his wine and looked at Levi thoughtfully. “And how are you enjoying your new position in Society?”

Levi paused for a moment, wondering how honest he should be. He did not know Neil particularly well, but he had always liked the man, and perhaps Neil had something to teach him about what it meant to be a good duke.

“I confess that I am not finding it easy,” Levi said quietly, not wishing to be overheard. “I was never expecting this to be how my life turned out, so it has all come as something of a shock.”

Neil nodded. “It was a little different for me, of course, as I always knew that it was my destiny. But I sometimes imagine what it would be like for Gabriel, my younger brother, if something happened to me and he had to take up the reins

until my son was old enough to manage things by himself. It is not easy when you are not prepared.”

Levi shook his head. “I feel that everyone thinks I should be grateful for this elevation in my status, but honestly, I prefer the freedom of my old life.”

Neil smiled. “I am sure you will get used to it in due course,” he said kindly. “And, you know, being a duke need not curtail your freedom all that much.”

Levi sighed. “But how can I leave the estate when everything is such a mess?” He lowered his voice again. “There are so many problems on the estate, and I feel that I barely know where to start. Everything I have tried has failed.”

Neil sat back in his chair, pressing his fingers together. “Tell me what you have tried, Coltfoot. I will help in any way I can.”

Levi explained the various investments he had considered, and how he had gone about approaching a few matters of business pertaining to the dukedom, while Neil listened intently.

When Levi had finished speaking, Neil cleared his throat. “Well, Levi, I must confess that I misjudged you when I first met you.”

Levi raised an eyebrow. “In what way?”

“Well, when we all met for the first time at the wedding, I thought you were a typical younger son. Carefree, adventurous, perhaps not inclined to spend much time in polite society. And certainly not a man with a head for business. But I see now that I was wrong.”

Levi shook his head, trying not to laugh. “I am not at all convinced that I have really changed that much.”

Neil shook his head. “No, not at all, my friend. What you have just said to me is all rather impressive, in fact, for someone with so little experience in managing a large estate. I am impressed by the way you have approached things. I am sure that if you keep on going the way you have been, things will improve.” He paused for a moment and looked at Neil a little shrewdly. “And I suspect that you have another strategy running alongside this, but we shall not speak of it here.”

He got to his feet, then, and greeted Catherine and Lady Adeline, who were just returning to the table.

Levi looked up at the ladies as they approached, and saw that coldness in Catherine’s eyes again. Even though she was being so dismissive towards him and treating him as if he was a mere distraction, an annoyance, he found that he could hardly keep his eyes off her.

He thought back to the way she had looked at him when she had returned his handkerchief when they had been on the balcony at the ball a few nights ago. Although there had been a smile on her face, the look in her eyes had been angry, perhaps even hurt.

He realized, with a jolt, that she must have overheard some of what he had said to Michael.

His cheeks burned with shame. If she had heard him insulting her, it was no surprise that now she was treating him with such disdain. He resolved to try and find a way to apologize to her, although he had no idea how he would manage to speak to her alone, or how he would find the right words to explain what he had meant. The whole situation was becoming very complicated, indeed.

Lady Adeline sat down again next to him but turned away almost immediately and began to speak to the gentleman who was sitting on her other side. Her actions only served to contribute to the complex swathe of emotions he was feeling. He wanted her to focus her attention on him, and he did not like the feeling of being slighted. And yet, he hated that he had to pursue her and pretend to find her interesting when, really, he felt nothing for her.

But he had settled on his strategy to free his estate from debt. And then, if what Neil was suggesting was correct, perhaps he could have some more of his old freedom back. If his estate was flourishing, perhaps he could leave it in the hands of a capable and trustworthy estate manager for a while and go off and see some of the world, as he had always planned to.

He thought back to Catherine's enthusiasm for travel and compared it to Lady Adeline's distaste for horses, and apparent fondness for gossip. It felt unfair, even wrong, that he was forced to pursue a young lady whom he had no attraction for and no interest in, but the die was cast. He would have to plough on with his plan, in spite of this uncomfortable feeling that gnawed at his heart.

He sat quietly as the main course was served; both his neighbors on either side were engaged in conversation with other people. Catherine met his eyes across the table and gave a sly smile. He had already been feeling rather tense, and the way she looked at him only made things worse.

CHAPTER 5



Levi had barely spoken to anyone throughout the duration of the main course. It was fortunate that the wine was excellent and the food – roasted meat with a variety of vegetables – was delicious. He tried to enjoy it for what it was, and not to panic that he was clearly now being slighted by Lady Adeline. His neighbor on the other side, an elderly aunt of the Rivers family, was engaged in a lively debate with her other neighbor, which he did not mind so much, but he was beginning to feel slightly embarrassed at not being included in anyone’s conversation.

And every time he glanced up from his plate, he saw Catherine looking at him, with that same amused look in her eyes. He wanted to ask her what she found so funny, but he did not want to draw attention to the awkwardness of the whole situation, so he held his tongue and tried his best to relax and enjoy himself.

The main course drew to a close, and he sensed a lull in the conversation between Lady Adeline and Lord Thomas, the eldest son of their hosts, Lord and Lady Rivers. He jumped at the chance to interject, turning to Lady Adeline immediately.

“My Lady, your wine glass is empty, will you allow me to fill it for you?” he asked. “Or perhaps you would prefer some

water?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you, Your Grace.”

She immediately turned away from him again and resumed her conversation with Lord Thomas, and Levi felt a flush of embarrassment and anger creep up his cheeks as he watched Lord Thomas reach across the table for the decanter of wine and fill up her glass.

She was clearly slighting him now, and he had no idea why. Their conversation had been stilted, yes, but he did not think he had done anything to offend her. And yet, as he met Catherine’s eyes across the table and saw her smile, he felt sure that she knew what was going on. He let out a sigh. Perhaps it was all going to be beyond him, he thought, navigating polite society in this way and trying to find a wife.

Neil and Lord Rivers, sitting a little way down the table, close to Catherine, were engaged in a lively debate about various aspects of managing a large estate.

“Coltfield, what do you think?” Neil said across the table, pulling Levi’s attention away from his current worries.

“About what, Whitewell?” Levi asked, feeling somewhat cheered to at last be involved in a conversation.

“We have been talking about pest control, and how to manage the fox and badger population. Rivers here has been having terrible trouble. The little monsters have been ruining his fences and digging holes in the lawn.”

Levi smiled wryly. “I suppose that when we, men, try to control nature, sometimes the animal kingdom decides to get its revenge.”

“And quite right too,” Catherine interjected.

He raised an eyebrow. “Indeed, Lady Catherine,” he said, wanting to acknowledge her comment but neither to agree or disagree with it.

It was better, he thought, to engage her in the conversation rather than to have her simply watching and laughing at him behind her napkin.

“So, you would go for the extermination option, then, wouldn’t you?” Lord Rivers said, then took a gulp of wine. “My estate manager is against it – I think he is rather squeamish about the whole thing, to be honest. But I think it’s the only option.”

“Well, the hunt should sort out the foxes,” Levi said. “Perhaps we can arrange a get-together on your estate soon and see what we can do?”

Lord Rivers grinned. “A capital idea!”

Catherine let out a groan. “I do not understand how you gentlemen can be so devoted to your dogs and your horses, and yet be so cruel to other animals.”

Neil glanced at her curiously. “Catherine, I have never heard you make such a comment before.”

“Well, I am making it now,” she said, a little sulkily. “Am I not permitted to say what I think? Or is this a conversation that only gentlemen are allowed to partake in?”

“Not at all, Lady Catherine,” Lord Rivers said affably. “You are more than welcome to chip in with your views, although I think from the look on the Duke’s face, he is not likely to agree with you.”

Catherine turned to Levi and glared at him. “And what is your proposed solution for the badgers, Your Grace? Poison, or traps?”

Levi cleared his throat. “I must admit that I have not much experience in managing badgers causing trouble on an estate—”

“I thought as much!” Catherine interrupted him with a hint of triumph in her voice. “And yet, you are poised to give your advice, all the same.”

“Catherine!” Neil said, looking at her in amazement. “What has got into you this evening?”

“Nothing at all, dear Neil,” she replied, smiling sweetly at her brother. “I am just very keen to understand the Duke’s preferred method of killing innocent animals.”

Levi paused and took a breath, unsure if he liked the direction this conversation was taking. He noticed that the table around them had gone quiet, and everyone, including Lady Adeline next to him, was now waiting for him to speak.

“Well, as I said, I do not profess to be a great expert... But you must concede that Lord Rivers cannot be expected to tolerate the disruption caused by these animals?”

Catherine snorted and hid her face behind her napkin again. Levi did his best to ignore her.

“I think in your situation, Lord Rivers, I would take the advice of my estate manager, and then choose the option that seems the most humane, but the most effective.” Levi glanced quickly around the table, trying to gauge the response to his comment. “But as you all know, I have not been a duke for long, and I am still learning how to manage my estate, so I would perhaps be more inclined to seek advice than many other more well-established noblemen.”

Lord Rivers nodded sagely. “I quite agree with you, Coltfoot. But the fact is that my estate manager thinks we should live and let live, but I cannot allow that to happen. The little blighters are digging up the croquet lawn, and Lady Rivers will not tolerate that, will you, my dear?” He turned to his wife, who was sitting next to him, and smiled.

Lady Rivers shook her head, then disengaged from the conversation, seeming to be distracted by the arrangements for the next course that were quietly going on around them.

“I quite agree with you, My Lord,” Levi said, feeling that, at last, he was beginning to get into his stride. “The croquet lawn must remain sacred, at any country house.”

Catherine glared at him. “I thought you were a great animal lover, Your Grace. I have heard you talk of your horse almost with as much affection as I talk of my sister and brothers. So, if your horse were to trample our croquet lawn, you would be quite happy for me to have him exterminated?”

Levi felt a jolt of anger coursing through him. She was being contrary just for the sake of it, he was sure. Of course, there was every difference in the world between badgers and his beloved horse.

“I think you are trying to vex me, Lady Catherine, although I have no idea why.” He paused and held her gaze. “You know as well as I do that that is not a fair comparison.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “Why are some animals more valuable than others? Is it perhaps for the same reason that some young ladies are more valuable than others?” She looked at him meaningfully, then glanced at Lady Adeline.

Levi winced. He did not know how to escape from this argument with his dignity intact, but he did not like what she was insinuating. How on earth could he respond to such a comment with anything resembling propriety?

“Lady Catherine—” he began but felt a flash of gratitude as Neil interjected.

“Coltfield, forgive me,” Neil said, then turned to his sister. “Catherine, I do not know if you are feeling unwell, but you are behaving most strangely. Perhaps a turn outside would do you good before the next course arrives?”

Catherine looked as if she was about to argue with her brother, but she bit her lip and held back, glancing around the table and finally noticing that everyone was looking at her. “I am quite well, dear brother, but thank you for asking.” She took a sip of water and glanced around the table again. “I am simply passionate when it comes to animals, but I will hold my peace now.” She glanced at Levi. “But I do not consider myself to be beaten,” she added quietly, then fixed her brown eyes on the table in front of her.

“Well,” Lord Rivers said, a little too loudly. “A healthy debate is good for the appetite, is it not?”

There was a murmur of agreement around the table, and Levi sensed that everyone was grateful to see the end of the argument between himself and Catherine. He sensed that it would be the talk of the breakfast tables of the *ton* the following morning, but that could not be helped.

He supposed that he would have to get used to being gossiped about now that he was a duke in search of a wife.



Catherine could still feel her heart racing in her chest as she sat quietly on the opposite side of the table from Levi. She forced herself to resist the urge to look up at him again.

Neil had been right to stop her when he had, of course, but it did not stop her from being angry with him, all the same. Why should young ladies hold their peace and not express strong opinions? And why should men like Levi, who had barely any experience of managing an estate, give their opinion in such a considered way, as if they were an expert?

And that was not to mention his whole strategy for looking for a wife. Men like him viewed young ladies as nothing more than an investment, like a horse, or a set of fence posts. An investment to add to their estate. And she was convinced that she had done the right thing in warning Lady Adeline about him.

Lady Adeline had been shocked, of course, but grateful to Catherine for telling her the truth. She wanted a love match, after all, in spite of her healthy dowry, and she had spent the last four years trying to avoid men like Levi, who were only interested in her for her money.

It had given Catherine great pleasure to watch her slighting Levi after they had returned to the table. She was much better suited to Lord Thomas. Catherine wondered why she had not thought of it before. He had plenty of money of his own, so if he was paying her attention, it must be because he really liked her, rather than because he wanted to get his hands on her dowry.

She looked over at the pair of them now. They were chatting happily about the latest gossip of the *ton*, and she felt a sense of resolve forming. She would not allow any of her friends to fall victim to Levi's scheming. She knew that most of the young ladies in their social circle liked and trusted her, and she was determined to use her position for the greater good. And if that meant that Levi never found a wife, then so be it.

At the end of the final course, Catherine got up and went to speak to Neil.

“Brother, I do feel a little tired,” she said. “I think I would like to go home. Do you wish to stay?”

He shook his head. “No, I will come home with you now.” He paused for a moment and frowned. “We should send a note to Constance and Michael too, and see how the baby is. I have been worrying about it all night, I must confess.

“I am sure everything is fine, but even so...” He turned to Lord Rivers. “My Lord, I hope that you will forgive me and my sister for taking our leave from you now. Catherine is feeling a little unwell, and I confess I am rather worried about my young nephew, who has also been ill. I am keen to send word to my sister and find out if everything is all right.”

Lord Rivers stood up and shook his hand. “Not at all, Whitewell. I quite understand. Family is the most important thing, after all.”

Neil nodded and took Catherine’s arm. “Thank you for having us. The dinner was delicious and we had a very pleasant time.”

Catherine allowed herself a final glance in Levi’s direction and saw immediately that his eyes were fixed on her. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head, with the tiniest of movements, almost as if he was telling himself to keep quiet, then turned to the elderly lady next to him and began conversing with her.

Lady Adeline and Lord Thomas were deep in conversation, and Catherine felt a sense of satisfaction as she and her brother left the dining room. Her intervention this evening had been a job well done.



Levi tried very hard to concentrate on the conversation with Lord Rivers' elderly aunt, but he could not help but be a little distracted by Catherine's early departure.

He had been hoping to speak to her in the drawing room after dinner without attracting too much attention, but that opportunity had been taken away from him. And now she had left without him having had the chance to apologize for what he had said to Michael on the balcony on the night of the ball.

He still did not know how he would have found the words to speak to her about it, but he knew now that she must have heard him, and that she almost certainly hated him for insulting her.

But he was powerless to do anything about it. And clearly, his efforts with Lady Adeline had been wasted, too. She was focused entirely on Lord Thomas now, and Levi had to admit to himself that they seemed to be a much better match than Lady Adeline and himself would ever have been. They were exchanging news and gossip next to him very happily, and in his heart, he was glad of it. He did not like the thought of anyone having to marry without love, or without affection, at least. But now, he was a duke, and that was the way of the world. And the sooner he accepted his fate, the better.

CHAPTER 6



The following morning, Catherine sat in the breakfast room, taking occasional sips of coffee in between tearing a bread roll into tiny pieces.

“Catherine, what on earth has that bread roll done to offend you?” Isabel asked, laughing. “You seem to be intent on destroying it completely!”

Catherine looked down at her plate, now littered with torn-up bits of bread. “Oh, I had not even noticed what I was doing,” she said, then lifted her coffee cup to her lips and enjoyed the sensation of the hot liquid coursing down her throat.

“You seem rather distracted this morning, my dear, if you do not mind my saying so,” Ambrose observed, setting down his newspaper on the table next to him.

“Oh, it is nothing.” Catherine waved her hand dismissively in front of her face.

“Now, Catherine, if we are to be with you for the whole of the Season, as is the plan, then you must be honest with us,” Isabel said firmly. “I can tell you are distressed, and even Ambrose,

who is usually so dull about such things, can tell that there is something wrong.” She cast a playful glance at her husband. “So, please, do tell us what is bothering you. Perhaps we can help?”

Catherine sighed. “It is the Duke of Coltfoot. He is simply so vexing. I do not know how I shall manage not to lose my temper with him again.”

Isabel raised an eyebrow. “I thought that you and he were great friends? I remember you could talk about nothing else for weeks after Constance’s wedding.”

Catherine looked at her friend fondly and felt a stab of gratitude that she had come into her life when she had. She had come with Lydia to a house party at Sandhill Estate some years ago, seeking to convince Neil to allow her some more time to repay a debt that her father had owed him, and Lydia and Neil had fallen in love.

Alongside that, Isabel and Catherine had formed a very close friendship that had given them both a lot of happiness. And now, she was glad that her friend was here to confide in. And Isabel had found love with Ambrose, the Earl of Hertford, who was one of the most pleasant men that Catherine had ever met. She only wished that she could find such happiness in marriage herself, but she had to admit to herself that she was starting to give up hope.

“I don’t know why I liked him!” Catherine exclaimed. “I thought he was kind and pleasant, but now I know that he is just like every other gentleman of the *ton*.”

Ambrose frowned. "That does not sound like Coltfoot at all," he said tentatively. "I am sure if he was really not a good man, then Michael would not be such good friends with him. What has happened to alter your opinion of him so drastically?"

Catherine huffed. "I barely know where to start. I danced with him at the ball, as you know, but afterward, I overheard him talking to Michael. He said I was childish and desperate for a husband! Can you imagine!"

Ambrose raised an eyebrow. "I do not wish to contradict you, dear Catherine, but are you sure he said those exact words? It really does not sound like him at all to speak so harshly."

"Well, perhaps he did not say I was desperate for a husband, but he did use that word. And he said that I would end up a spinster if I did not change my views."

Isabel sighed. "I am sure that it was most horrible for you to hear him say such things, but I cannot help but think that there must be some misunderstanding. Has something else happened?"

Catherine nodded. "He told Michael, quite plainly, that he is looking to marry a young lady with a large dowry. His estate is in debt, and he has tried everything to no avail, so now he must marry for money. I think it is quite disgraceful!"

"Well, Catherine, you must admit that he would not be the first gentleman to seek such an arrangement," Isabel said. "We cannot all be lucky enough to find love and security in marriage." She glanced at Ambrose and gave him a gentle smile.

Ambrose nodded. "Indeed. You know that what many of the couples of your acquaintance have found is actually quite rare. To marry for love, when one holds a title, is not something that everyone can expect to be able to achieve."

Catherine nodded impatiently. "I know that. I am not so childish as everyone thinks I am!"

Isabel shook her head. "I do not think you are childish, my dear. Far from it. You wish to marry for love, and you shall, I have no doubt about it. But for others, it is not such an important consideration. And if the Duke is in trouble financially, well, then he will feel that his options are limited. It is not an enviable position to be in, really."

"But if that is the case, then he should look for a young lady who seeks a similar arrangement," Catherine insisted.

Isabel frowned. "Is that not the case? I would have thought that it was not unheard of for a duke to be looking for such a thing, and for there to be plenty of young ladies who would be happy to join him in such an alliance. He is a duke, after all, and whoever he marries will have all the status and privilege of becoming a duchess!"

"I do not think that he is being upfront about it," Catherine said. "I had to watch him last night trying to impress Lady Adeline, and honestly, the whole experience was painful. They clearly had absolutely nothing in common and could barely find two words to say to one another."

She let out a low chuckle. “When Lady Adeline confessed that she hated horses, I could hardly stop myself from laughing. We all know that the Duke dotes on his horse. There could not be a worse match. And yet, he persevered for most of the evening, even though Lady Adeline was trying to talk with Lord Thomas. She is much better suited to him, anyway.”

Ambrose gave a wry smile. “It sounds rather as if you are playing matchmaker, Catherine,” he said. “Or rather, match breaker. You should be careful, you know. You do not want people to think that you are interfering with other people’s business.”

Catherine pushed her plate of ripped-up pieces of bread away from her, sending it skittering across the table. “I will not allow him to mislead young ladies who are my friends, though!” she insisted.

“Catherine... what have you done?” Isabel asked, wide-eyed with suspense. “You have interfered already, haven’t you?”

Catherine looked down at the table, unable for a moment to meet her friend’s eyes. But then she remembered the sense of resolve she had felt as she had walked away from Levi and Michael on the balcony at the ball. She was doing the right thing, stopping him from entrapping other young ladies, she was convinced of it.

“I spoke to Lady Adeline, yes,” Catherine said. “I am not ashamed of it. I do not think it is right that he should be misleading young ladies into thinking that he is interested in them, when really all he wants is their dowries.”

Ambrose shook his head. “Really, Catherine, you are taking a very dim view of him. Coltfoot is not a manipulative man. I am sure that the situation is a little more complex than as you describe it.”

“No, it is not!” Catherine insisted, feeling her temper beginning to flare. “He is only looking at marriage as a business deal, whereas I know that Lady Adeline wants to find love. If she was not looking for a love match, she could have found a husband years ago. But she, like me, is holding firm, hoping for something better.”

“But, Catherine, perhaps the Duke is not misleading anyone,” Isabel said gently. “Maybe it is clear to the young ladies in question the kind of arrangement he is seeking.”

Catherine shook her head. “I am sure that it is not. It is a form of entrapment. He wants to snare them like he would snare a fox or a badger. And I will not let it happen, not to my friends at least!”

Isabel and Ambrose exchanged glances, and Catherine did not fail to notice the concern in both their eyes.

“Well, I see that you have made up your mind, Catherine, and I will not seek to alter it,” Ambrose said, getting to his feet and folding up his newspaper. “But I do think that the situation might be a little more complex than you imagine.” He leaned over and dropped a kiss on Isabel’s cheek. “I am going to discuss some business with Neil now. I shall see you later.”

He left the room, and Catherine and Isabel sat quietly for a while before Isabel cleared her throat and began to speak.

“Catherine, dear, I do understand that you are angry with the Duke for insulting you, but I do think that you would do well to leave him to his own devices. You cannot blame him for looking for a marriage of convenience. As Ambrose and I have said, it is not an uncommon thing in Society, after all.”

Catherine shrugged. “I know that it is not uncommon. I just think that he should be more honest about it, that’s all. I cannot look the other way if I think that there is a risk of my friends getting hurt.”

Isabel sighed. “I see that Ambrose is right and you will not be convinced.”

Catherine nodded but said nothing. There was nothing else to say. Her mind was made up.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” Isabel asked, at last, clearly relieved to be changing the subject.

“Well, I do not think that we are expecting any callers this morning, so I thought that I might go for a ride,” Catherine said. “The weather is fine, and I think the fresh air would do me good. Would you like to join me?”

Isabel nodded. “That sounds like an excellent plan.”

Catherine smiled, glad to have company on her morning excursion. She could not help remembering, though, the enthusiasm with which Levi had told her about his beloved

horse, all that time ago when they had first met at Constance and Michael's wedding.

Perhaps she had gone too far in her jibes about being cruel to other animals that were less valuable than horses. But in her mind, she was firm. He was treating young ladies as nothing more than possessions, and she could not stand by and allow him to continue to behave in such a monstrous way.

The Season had only just begun, and there were many balls and parties coming up. Catherine decided, as she headed up to her room to change into her riding habit, that she would not take her eyes off Levi for a moment. If he had approached Lady Adeline with the intention of trapping her into a loveless marriage, then no doubt he was planning to do the same with other young ladies. But she had it in her power, as one of the most popular young ladies in her circle, to take action to protect her friends' dowries and their hearts. And she would not hesitate to do what she thought was right, despite the warnings of Ambrose and Isabel.

She knew that they were only offering her advice because they cared about her, but she was sure that, soon, they too would come to see the Duke for who he really was. And then, they would realize that she had been right all along.

CHAPTER 7



Levi jumped off his horse and landed on the dusty track with a thud. He took her reins and led her towards the stables that were situated to one side of his sister's house. He knew the groom well and trusted him to make sure that Molly would be well looked after following the long ride from his estate at Coltfoot to his sister's home.

He could, of course, have chosen to come by carriage, but as was often the case, he preferred to ride. He enjoyed the sensation of being outside in the fresh air, as well as the company of his beloved horse, whom he trusted with his life.

He patted Molly's neck, then walked away from the stables and towards the front door of the large sandstone house. The door was already open for him, the butler standing, waiting.

"Your Grace, what a pleasure to see you. Your sister is in the parlor with the children. Allow me to show you in."

Levi nodded. "There is no need to take me there, Benson," he said. "I'm sure you have plenty to do, and I know the way."

Benson raised an eyebrow but did not argue. “Very well, Your Grace.” He turned on his heel and headed back towards the kitchen, leaving Levi standing in the entrance hall.

Levi wondered if he would ever get used to the extra deference that was paid to him now that he was a duke. He was sure that some men would enjoy it, but to him, it always felt rather forced and uncomfortable.

He looked around the hallway, thinking how much more welcoming it was than the hallway at his own house on Coltfoot Estate. He still had not quite gotten used to living there, having spent most of his adult years living in various lodgings in London or Bath, or traveling on the Continent. But now, he was the master of a large house, and he had to pretend to enjoy it and to know what to do when people came to tell him of problems with roofs and windows and other such things that he had never thought twice about before in his life.

His sister Sophia’s husband was the Viscount of Westkees, a perfectly respectable gentleman, of course, and with a title to boot, but his estate was much smaller than Levi’s, and the house much more homely and manageable. Levi felt a stab of envy as he made his way down the corridor which he knew led to the comfortable parlor where his sister spent most of her time when just the family were at home.

He knocked on the door and opened it, and the moment he did so, two small blonde heads rushed towards him, barreling into him in a crescendo of giggles. They were followed by a small, brown puppy yapping madly.

Levi scooped up both children in his arms and balanced them perfectly, one on each hip. “You shall soon be too big for this!” he cried, looking smilingly at their happy faces.

Emma, the youngest, was only three and had always had trouble pronouncing his name. “Lebi!” she yelled, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Charlotte, three years older, thought herself much more grown up and wriggled to be put down. “I am too big already, Uncle Levi,” she declared. “Would you like to come and see our new doll’s house? Papa bought it for us.”

From the other side of the room, Sophia chimed in from her position on the floor next to the doll’s house that Charlotte had just mentioned. “And are you not the luckiest little girls in the world?”

“Yes, Mama,” the girls chorused before Charlotte took Levi’s hand and pulled him across the room.

“Come and play!” she urged him.

He obeyed her and allowed her to show him the new doll’s house, along with each and every piece of furniture that belonged to it. Then, he scooped Emma up onto his shoulders, and ran around the room in circles for a while, with Charlotte chasing behind.

When they were all puffed out and exhausted, Sophia, who had been sitting on the floor a little distance from them and watching them play, spoke up. “Come along now, girls. I think it must be time for you to go and have your rest before dinner.”

Sure enough, the door of the room swung open, and a young woman dressed in black with a white cap on her head came into the room.

“Look, here’s Sally,” Sophia said. “Go upstairs with her now, please, girls, and leave me and Uncle Levi to have some peace. We’ll see you later after your tea and before you go to bed. And I expect that if you ask him nicely, Uncle Levi will tell you one of his famous stories.”

“Oh, yes, please, Uncle Lebi!” Emma cried.

“Please, can we have the one about the time you got lost in the jungle again?” Charlotte pleaded.

Levi laughed. “We shall see. Perhaps I have even more exciting stories than that one!”

The girls giggled happily, then their nanny took their hands and led them out of the room.

“Honestly, Levi, I do think that those girls believe that you really are an explorer, the tales you spin for them,” Sophia said, grinning.

“Well, I like it that they think I am interesting,” Levi returned, trying to smile but feeling a pang in his heart at the recollection of his conversation with Catherine about traveling the world.

He would never be an explorer now, that was for sure, even if he wanted to be.

Sophia stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. “It has been a while, dear brother, since you last came to visit us.”

“I am sorry, Sophia,” Levi said, pulling away from her embrace and looking at her. “I have stayed away rather too long, I know. You look well, and the girls are perfect, as always.”

Sophia smiled. “Perfect, and noisy!”

“And is John well?”

“John is perfectly well, thank you. He has to go away on business so often, and he always brings such extravagant presents home. I think the children think that he is some sort of version of Saint Nicholas!”

“It must be hard for him to have to spend so much time away from his family,” Levi observed.

“Yes, I do think that he finds it hard. We are hoping that once things are resolved with his investments in the mines in the north, then he will not have to spend so much time away from home.”

Levi pondered her words for a moment. “I should like to talk to him more about that when he is home the next time. Perhaps

you could all come and stay with me for a few days, at Coltfoot.”

Sophia sighed. “I find it hard to come home, these days. So many painful memories.”

Levi nodded. “I must confess that it does not even really feel like home to me, even though I live there almost all the time now.”

“How are you, Levi, really?” Sophia asked, a concerned look on her face.

They sat down in two comfortable chairs facing one another, and Sophia poured them some tea.

Levi paused for a moment before replying, feeling unsure what to say. He had never lied to his sister in his life before, though, and he felt that now was not the time to start. “I must confess, Sophia, that I am finding life rather difficult at the moment.”

Sophia nodded. “I thought as much, the moment you entered the room. You might be able to hide it from the girls, but I can see through your smiles. What is troubling you?”

Levi sighed. “It all just feels rather too much for me sometimes, Sophia. I was never meant to be the Duke, and it does not seem right that the title should fall to me when I am so clearly ill-equipped to deal with it. It does not feel like my true destiny, somehow.” He paused for a moment. “And I never thought I would say it when he was alive, but I must

confess that I still feel the loss of our brother very keenly, indeed.”

Sophia nodded. “I feel it too. With Father, at least we had time to prepare. But with Theodore, it was so quick. We never had the chance to get used to the idea of his loss before he was gone. I feel like we did not even really have enough time to say goodbye.”

“I have so many regrets,” Levi said, hearing the tremble in his own voice as he spoke. “I used to tease him so much about how serious he was, and I was often jealous that Father paid him so much attention and ignored me. But I know now that Father was trying to prepare him to be the Duke, and that took a lot of work.”

Sophia shook her head. “Our father was very wrong to treat you two so differently,” she insisted. “I think that if Mother had lived, she would have tried to persuade him to be fairer, but after she was gone, it seemed to only get worse...”

“So much loss we have had to bear, Sophia,” Levi said sadly, thinking back to when their mother had died when he had been only thirteen years old and Sophia had been fifteen.

“But we have borne it,” Sophia replied. “I know that at times it has felt like too much to bear, the loss of Theodore in particular, but we have borne it, and I am sure that one day you will feel happy again.”

Levi sighed. “I am not sure that I can ever be happy now that I am a duke.” He bit his lip, feeling a strange reluctance to speak his feelings out loud, even to his sister. “I didn’t want

the title. I never envied Theodore for it, and I never felt that it was unfair that he would have this elevated position in Society and I would not. I enjoyed my freedom, and now all that is gone forever.”

“I do not think it is gone forever,” Sophia said. “I know that your life has changed a great deal, but it does not mean that your life is ruined.”

“It feels that way to me sometimes,” Levi replied. “Now that I have to walk in his shoes, I know how much Theodore must have had to put up with in that year he became a duke after Father died. There are so many troubles and problems on the estate, and our father left so much debt. He must have been so worried, and I did nothing to help him. I simply carried on living my carefree life, having no idea of the worries he must have been enduring.”

“But you could not have known, if he did not share them with you,” Sophia pointed out gently. “And now, you are sharing your worries with me, which will lessen the load a little. A problem shared is a problem halved, is that not the saying?”

“But it is my responsibility and mine alone to manage the dukedom now,” Levi said, feeling a wave of despair crashing over him. “And I feel so poorly equipped for the task. I know nothing about business or investments. I go into a panic if I have to go and speak with the tenants. I do not know what to say to them. They know more about the land than I do. They must all think I am a fool! How am I to command respect as a duke when I know nothing about my own land?”

“But you will learn, in good time, I am sure of it,” Sophia reassured.

Levi looked at his sister and saw the warmth in her eyes. She was trying to reassure him, he realized, but her kind words did nothing to help with the pain and anxiety that seemed to be fixed in his heart.

“I need a good estate manager, but then I worry that someone could come and take advantage of my ignorance, and the problems could get even worse. Perhaps I will try to speak again with Neil, Michael’s brother-in-law.” He paused and thought for a moment. “No, that would not work at all,” he said out loud, almost without realizing it.

Catherine had popped into his mind the moment he had mentioned Neil, and he knew that if he were to call on Neil, then no doubt he would have to see Catherine as well. And he still had not decided whether to persevere with his plans to apologize to her, or just to leave things be and hope that his actions at the ball did not have any further consequences.

“You seem so troubled, Levi. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

Levi shrugged. “You can feed me a good dinner and allow me to tell your daughters many a far-fetched tale. That will at least take my mind off things!”

Sophia laughed. “I promise you that I will do all of those things. Now, I am going to call for some cake, and then we can continue our chat. How does that sound?”

Levi smiled. His sister knew him well enough to know that a large slice of cake would always cheer him up.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, eating pieces of delicious cream cake that one of the maids had brought in.

“What do you think it would take for you to be happy with your new position in life, Levi?” Sophia asked, looking at him closely.

Levi frowned. “I wish I did not feel like such a failure in life,” he said slowly. “Our father always thought I was a failure, I know he did. I was never as successful at school as Theodore was, and I was no good at sports, apart from riding. He always said I had no purpose in life. I know I was a disappointment to him.”

He looked across at Sophia, knowing that she would not contradict him. She had grown up in the same household as him, after all, and she knew that what he was saying about their father was true.

“He would not have thought that I was worthy of the title, and I think he would have been right,” he finished.

“I wish I could have done more as your older sister.” Sophia sighed. “But I was only a girl, you know. I had no power to change anything. All I could do was sit around and wait for someone to marry me, to get me away from home and give me an establishment of my own.” She looked around at her comfortable parlor. “I am very grateful for what I have now, having known so much unhappiness when we were younger. I only wish that you could feel the same. And you are wrong when you say that you are not worthy of the title. Of course, you are worthy to be the Duke. I am sure that you will be a

fine duke, that you are one already. But it may take some time for you to believe that in your own heart.”

Levi remembered when she had met John. It had been clear to everyone around them that it was not a love match, but that the two young people had liked each other enough to think that they could be happy together. And they had managed it. They had three daughters together. The eldest, Eliza, must have been elsewhere this afternoon, but Levi was sure that he would see her later in the afternoon. Perhaps John felt the lack of a son, but he had never mentioned it, and Sophia was still young enough to have more children.

Thinking about their story, Levi wondered if he might allow himself to have a little hope, in terms of maybe one day having a happy marriage of his own.

“I have been trying to accept my position in the world,” Levi assured his sister. “It is just taking a little longer than I would like.” He took a bite of cake and mused again on the idea of a happy marriage. “Perhaps I will be happier when I have found a wife,” he said quietly, almost to himself.

Sophia, though, heard his last words and almost leaped out of her chair with excitement. “Oh, Levi, I am so happy to hear that you are looking for a wife, at last!”

Levi gave her a weak smile. “I think it is time that I found a duchess, indeed.”

“It is high time that you found love,” Sophia said. “I must have a proper think about all the young ladies of my acquaintance and see who I think might be a suitable match.”

Levi held his hands up and laughed softly. “Please, do not do that, Sophia! I think that I can choose my own wife.”

“But I know you so well, dear brother. I know just the type of young lady that you are most likely to find love with. Please, won’t you let me help you?”

Levi frowned, then forced himself to smile again. He would not confess to his sister that he had scarcely any hope of finding love and that he simply needed to marry in order to save the estate by securing a large dowry to pay off his debts.

He knew that his sister would understand if he explained everything to her, but he also knew that she would be disappointed that he did not seek to find a love match, even though she had not had one herself.

No, he would not correct her. He did not want her to worry about him being unhappy. He knew that he must do his duty and that he had to find a way to clear the debts of the estate by himself. He was the Duke now, and it was his responsibility and his alone.

“If you insist, Sophia, then I will hear your list of young ladies. But perhaps we can go and see the children first? I am sure that their high spirits will charm me far more than a list of Society misses that I must try to navigate my way through!”

CHAPTER 8



Levi took a sip of champagne and reflected on the novelty of finding himself in a ballroom for the second time in as many weeks, having not been to a ball for at least a year before now. He had always enjoyed a ball, in what he now thought of as his former life, but he found that this evening, he was not taking anywhere near as much pleasure from the experience as he once would have done.

The dance floor was full of couples whirling around together to the sound of a waltz. He thought back to his dance with Catherine at the previous ball and wondered if she would ever consent to dance with him again, then forced the thought out of his mind. She clearly disliked him intensely now, and he had already decided that she was not the kind of young lady that he would be at all interested in marrying. So, why on earth would his thoughts even turn to the idea of dancing with her again?

No, he had to concentrate on other young ladies, and there were plenty here at the ball tonight.

But the evening so far had been most peculiar. When he had entered the room, he had been expecting the usual reception that he received when he came into a room since he had become a duke. People would turn and look at him, and young

ladies would smile at him from behind their fans. Those young ladies' mothers and aunties would look at him too and whisper between themselves.

He knew that as a newly elevated duke, he was considered to be an eligible bachelor and a good match, but he could not say that he had particularly enjoyed the attention.

However, this evening, it had been notable only by its absence. As he walked through the room shortly after his arrival, he thought that he had noticed a couple of groups of young ladies turning away from him, rather than towards him.

And then, there was the rather strange exchange that he had with Miss Elizabeth Talbot. He had remembered what Michael had told him at the last ball about her dowry and had asked Neil to introduce him. He had thought that rather than simply asking her for a dance straight away, he would try to converse with her a little first, to see if they had anything in common.

But she had barely said a word to him. It was almost improper, how unresponsive she was to his questions. He had tried asking her about her family – he knew that she had a sister who had just gotten married – and she had answered with a single word. Then, she had looked at him very coldly and told him that she had a headache, and turned and walked away.

And yet, not ten minutes later, he had watched as Lord Thomas approached and asked her for a dance. She had accepted, taken his arm, and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor, then partaken in a rather boisterous country dance of two sets. That did not seem to him like the conduct of a young lady who was suffering from a headache.

Levi did not understand what was going on, and a sense of frustration threatened to engulf him as he looked around the room. Everyone else seemed to be chatting and laughing and having much more fun than he was, standing here on his own. He was not the sort of man to feel self-conscious, but really, he was convinced that something strange was going on, and he did not like it at all.

He shook his head and forced himself to think more positively. It was still early; there were plenty more opportunities to meet young ladies. He simply had to persevere with his plan, and in the end, he would achieve his goal.

He went back to looking around the room, trying to identify another young lady he could speak to. His eyes fell on Catherine, who was standing with Michael and Constance, whose child was much better now following his brief illness, and Levi was glad to see them back in Society again. He thought that perhaps he was imagining it, but he fancied that Catherine had been looking at him too. But as soon as their eyes met, she looked away, with what looked like the tiniest hint of a smile on her face.

Why did his thoughts keep on returning to her? He forced himself, once again, to think of other things and turned his attention instead to a group of young ladies standing near the door to the balcony. He felt a little anxious about approaching them all at once, and when he saw that Lady Adeline was amongst them, he decided against it.

He sighed. Surely it should not be this difficult?

Then, a little distance away from him, he noticed a young lady whom he remembered from the time before his father had passed away, and then his brother, when he had been much

more in Society. Miss Amelia Sutherland. She had always been pleasant to him, and he could not imagine that she would refuse to speak with him now.

With a new sense of confidence, he strode towards her, a wide smile on his face.

“Miss Sutherland, how pleasant it is to see you again,” he greeted her with a bow.

She looked at him for a second with interest, before a flicker of recognition crossed her face, followed by a marked change in the look in her green eyes. “Your Grace,” she replied, bobbing a very slight curtsy, then looking over his shoulder into the distance.

“Are you enjoying the ball?” he asked, feeling baffled as to why she was not even looking at him.

“Yes,” she said, still not meeting his eyes.

He looked at her, stunned. This was a lady who had been brought up in polite society and who knew how to behave, who was being almost rude to him in her curtness. He was taken aback. He was used to people enjoying his company and finding him charming. He had never in his life faced such an issue before.

She caught his eye for a second, then looked behind him again. “I must go to my sister,” she declared and walked off quickly, without looking back.

Levi stood where she had left him, feeling almost overcome with embarrassment. He glanced around quickly, hoping that no one else had witnessed what had just happened. But thankfully, everyone around him seemed to be too busy enjoying themselves to notice the humiliation he had just undergone.

One last try, he told himself. After that, he would go outside and get some air, or perhaps try to find Michael and speak to him about what was happening. Perhaps his friend could make sense of it for him.

He saw Lady Susan, Lady Adeline's younger sister, standing a little distance away from her group of friends, and he decided to seize the moment. They had been introduced briefly at the dinner party, so it would not be improper for him to address her directly.

"Good evening, Lady Susan," he said as he approached her. He gave his best smile but wondered as he did so whether he had something between his teeth, or something on his face. Perhaps that was the reason why everyone was treating him so strangely.

He wished for a moment that things were more honest in polite society. All this hiding behind fans and sly glances made him uneasy and did not suit his upfront nature.

Lady Susan had been waving her fan in front of her face to cool herself down in the rather oppressive heat of the ballroom, but when she saw him, she lowered her fan slightly and looked at him over the top of it, her blue eyes narrowing a little as she did so.

“Your Grace,” she said with a curtsy.

He was just about to speak, to say something about the weather, or the music that the orchestra was currently playing, when she held up her hand.

“Your Grace, you need not bother with small talk. I might as well tell you straight away that you are wasting your time with me.”

He looked at her, aghast, his heart beginning to pound in his chest. “What on earth do you mean, My Lady?”

“I mean,” she said slowly, “that I am not looking for a marriage of convenience. So, you are wasting your time talking to me, as I am not at all interested in entering into such an arrangement with you.”

Levi flinched. How on earth could she even know that this was what he was looking for?

She had not finished, though. “And might I make a suggestion, if Your Grace will permit me?”

“By all means,” he said, his voice catching a little in his throat as he spoke. He was at once appalled and fascinated to hear what she was going to say next.

“If all that you are interested in is a young lady’s dowry, then you would do well to go and see the matchmaker, who could help you find a young lady who is looking for a similar

arrangement.” She paused and looked at him shrewdly. “There are many gentlemen like you, you know, and many ladies who simply want an establishment of their own, and to start a family. You would be better off looking there, rather than at a ball, where most of the young ladies are looking for romance rather than a business transaction.”

Levi was speechless for a moment. He had, in fact, already been to see a matchmaker, and he remembered, with a touch of shame, the discomfort he had experienced during the whole process.

The matchmaker had given him a list of young ladies who were, indeed, open to such an arrangement, but none of them had dowries large enough to meet his needs, and so he had not made any progress at all, even after going through such an awkward and embarrassing encounter.

But how could this young lady, whom he hardly knew, be so well-informed about his intentions? Levi resolved to try to find out.

“Lady Susan,” he said carefully. “I am most grateful for your suggestion, and I shall consider it. I am extremely grateful for your honesty, I must confess. And I promise you that it was not my intention to mislead you, or any other young lady, for that matter.”

He looked into her eyes as he spoke and saw a hint of surprise there. And then, to his astonishment, she smiled at him. If he wasn't mistaken, she even seemed charmed.

“Well, perhaps you will allow me to confess that I was not expecting you to be so polite,” she admitted. “After what I had heard about you, I thought that you would be rude.”

Her cheeks pinkened a little as she spoke, and she stared at the ground as soon as she had finished, perhaps realizing the weight of what she had just said.

Levi’s eyebrows flew up again. “I hope that I have never been rude to anyone,” he said quietly. “I am most upset that anyone has led you to believe that I would behave in such a way. Will you permit me to ask you a final question? Then I promise that I will leave you in peace to enjoy the ball.”

She gave a nod and waited for him to speak.

He had half been expecting her to turn and walk away, so he was rather relieved to have the chance to ask her one last thing. “Might you tell me who it is that said these things about me?”

Lady Susan gave him a slightly pitying look. “Your Grace, perhaps I should not tell you, but I think that you will never get what you need if you do not know what is going on. Lady Catherine Windham has been telling all the young ladies of her acquaintance that you are trying to trap a young lady into a marriage of convenience. And as you may know, she is a very popular young lady, and has a very large network.”

Levi nodded. “I am aware that Lady Catherine is, indeed, very popular,” he said, glancing across the room for a moment to where he saw the lady in question standing surrounded by other young ladies, their heads together in close conversation.

“And there is more if you will permit me. There are rumors that you are over-indulgent, that you are fond of gambling, and other such things that would make you seem an unattractive prospect, if you catch my meaning.” Lady Susan lowered her voice even further. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but I think it is only right that you know everything.”

He turned his attention back to her. “I am truly grateful, My Lady, to find out what is really going on here this evening. Please, be assured, once again, that I have never sought to do anything dishonorable, to yourself or any other young lady. I hope that you enjoy the rest of the evening.”

He bowed and turned away from her, walking towards the balcony. If he had been in need of fresh air earlier, then the need now was urgent.

He pushed the door open and went outside, only to see that the balcony was busy with throngs of people. Sure enough, a group of young ladies who had gathered close to the door all turned away from him as he approached, and then began to whisper to one another, casting surreptitious glances at him as he passed. No wonder, when they had all heard such terrible things about him.

He sighed and walked to the far side of the balcony, and stood at the very edge, looking out over the garden, which was now shrouded in darkness.

Lady Catherine was turning out to be a thorn in his side, the bane of his existence. He cursed himself for ever speaking of her the way he had done to Michael. That had been the start of

it, after all. And now, it seemed that she was hell-bent on ruining his life and scuppering all his plans to marry.

And what was he going to do if he could not find a wife? The future of his estate depended on it. But she seemed determined to thwart him.

He made a swift decision, right there and then, that he could not allow this to continue. He would have to go and find her and talk to her, maybe even apologize. He had to do something to limit the damage that she was inflicting on his life.

He took in gulps of cool night air and tried to prepare himself for his next challenge of the evening. As he did so, he reflected that he would never have thought, on the day of Constance and Michael's wedding when he had met the charming and vivacious girl with the dark blonde hair and the freckle on her upper lip, that his acquaintance with her would cause him so much trouble.

But things could not continue like this. He was not going to let Lady Catherine Windham ruin his life.

CHAPTER 9



Catherine felt her cheeks burn as she walked away from the dance floor. She thought that she had already encountered the worst kind of gentleman the *ton* could offer, but the gentleman she had just danced with had been worse than all the fortune hunters put together.

He might well have been a viscount, but the way he had looked at her as if she were a piece of meat on his dinner plate made her feel sick. She had been sure that his eyes had lingered on the neckline of her gown, and when he had lowered his voice and suggested that they sneak out of the ballroom and into the garden together, she knew that her instincts had been correct.

Catherine looked straight ahead as she walked away from him, but she had a sense all the same that he was following her. The sooner she was back standing next to Constance and Michael, the better. Surely he would not accost her further when she was with her family?

As she strode across the room, she almost crashed into a gentleman who was walking straight towards her. She blinked, trying to regain her composure, and then realized with a jolt that it was Levi, and he was now standing in front of her, staring at her.

“Lady Catherine,” he began, but before he could continue, Catherine heard her name being called by another voice behind her. The gentleman she had just danced with. The Viscount of Shropfield.

She shuddered. She did not want to turn and look at him, but she knew that if she did not, she would seem insufferably rude.

She swallowed, then glanced up at Levi a little nervously before turning around to face the Viscount.

“Lady Catherine, I was hoping that you would join me for another dance!” Lord Shropfield said, leering at her from behind his bushy mustache. “But you seem to be running away from me. Whatever is a gentleman to think?”

Catherine suppressed a groan. She could not think of a reason to refuse him, and she inwardly cursed the rules of the ballroom that gave men all the power of choice and women not even the power of refusal. She knew that the only reason she could give to refuse him would be if she was engaged to dance with someone else for this dance, but that was not the case, and he would see that she had lied if she did not go onto the dance floor with someone else.

She was stuck. She would have no choice but to say yes, and then have to suffer his awful behavior for the duration of another whole dance. It did not bear thinking about.

Behind her, she heard Levi cough. “Lady Catherine, you cannot have overlooked the fact that you promised this dance to me,” he said firmly.

She whirled around and stared at him. He was looking at her with his eyebrows raised in expectation and holding his hand out to her. Was he rescuing her? She could not quite believe it. Why on earth would he save her after everything that had happened between them?

But she could not refuse this offer, this chance to escape from the Viscount.

“Your Grace, I had not forgotten, I was just coming to find you,” she replied, in as even a tone as she could manage, then took his hand and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor.

She could scarcely believe that for the first time in her life, she had been in the supposedly enviable position of having two men wanting to dance with her at the same time. But the irony was not lost on her that she did not particularly want to dance with either of them. And yet, as she looked at Levi while they stood opposite one another, waiting for the dance to begin, she felt a surge of gratitude, along with a mix of other more complicated emotions that she could not quite name.

She knew, too, that if she had danced a second time with the Viscount, people would have assumed that there was some kind of attachment growing between them, and this was the last thing she wanted. So, Levi really had saved her from scandal and gossip, and she knew that she ought to thank him, but the words would not come. It would be simply too awkward to say it all out loud to him.

Instead, they stood in silence for a few moments as the first notes of the dance began. Then, he took her hand and led her down the dance, his feet making light work of the steps. It

occurred to Catherine, as they paused at the other end of the dance floor and waited for the other couples to take their turn, that it did not seem like he had been away from Society for such a long time. He danced as if he went to a ball every week and knew the steps of every dance like the back of his hand.

She wished that he would say something, though. It was most awkward to be standing there in silence when all the other couples were chatting amicably, as was expected during the pauses in a country dance.

Eventually, he turned to her and broke the silence, his voice low so that only she could hear what he was saying.

“Lady Catherine, I am glad that we have a chance to talk,” he began. “I would like to ask you why you are spreading these false rumors about me. I feel that it is most unjust.”

Catherine stared at him. She had not been expecting him to be quite so blunt, and she found that she admired him for it. But still, she felt that she had to defend herself against his accusations.

“They are not false rumors, Your Grace,” she replied, quietly but firmly.

“You have made every young lady in the *ton* think that I am a rogue!” Levi protested. “I am not a rude person, and yet everyone is treating me as if I am a monster.”

His dark blue eyes flashed with anger as he spoke, and Catherine felt her stomach twist into knots. She had done the

right thing, though – she was sure of it. “I have simply told all the ladies of my acquaintance that you are looking for a marriage of convenience, rather than a love match. It is only fair that they should know the truth so that you cannot mislead them into something that they do not want. I have said nothing else.” She raised an eyebrow. “It is not my fault if people are now saying other things too. Rumors have a habit of escalating rather dramatically as they are passed from person to person, you know, but that is not my responsibility.”

“But, Lady Catherine, I have never sought to mislead anyone,” he insisted.

Catherine looked at him, at his frank, open face, and thought for a moment that she could easily believe what he was saying. But she would not be so easily swayed. “That is just what every fortune hunter in the *ton* would say,” she retorted. “You are just as bad as all of them.”

“Lady Catherine, it is very unfair of you to say that.”

She glared at him and then realized that it was their turn to dance again. “Your Grace, we must dance, or people will stare at us.”

He looked around, almost as if he was remembering where they were, and then took her hands and led her down the dance. She felt the power of his shoulders and his arms as he swung her around. It was almost as if she could sense his anger in the movement of his body.

They reached the other end of the dance floor and paused again. Catherine knew that their previous conversation was not

over. They were not going to revert to small talk about the weather and the heat of the room, she was sure of that. But she was determined not to back down.



Levi's heart was pounding as they reached the end of the dance and took their places amongst the other couples to wait as the dance progressed. His heart was pounding, and not simply from the exertion of dancing. He thought that he had never felt so angry before in all his life, but he did not know how to make Catherine change her mind, let alone persuade her to do something to repair the damage she had caused his reputation. But he was not going to let it go, even though she looked as if she would much prefer to talk of something else.

“Lady Catherine, don't you see, you are ruining my reputation?”

She frowned and held his gaze with those deep brown eyes. He looked away, unable to bear the intensity of it.

“Your Grace, you should have thought about that before you began to approach young ladies with large dowries with whom you obviously had nothing in common.”

Levi felt his temper beginning to flare again. Really, she was being impossible!

“I have done no such thing!” he said hotly.

She laughed, then, her face opening up like the sunrise, and Levi felt his heart jolt. He remembered the first time he had

met her at the wedding, when they had danced together and talked about horses and what a pleasure it was to ride fast across the countryside, in any weather. She had laughed then, too, and he could not help but remember all the reasons why he had found her so attractive.

But it did not matter. She was not the one for him. He had to push such thoughts from his mind and concentrate on the matter at hand. He had to get her to believe that he was a man of integrity. Otherwise, his chances of finding a wife with the dowry he needed would be over.

“I am glad that I amuse you, Lady Catherine,” he said, “but I beg you to take this seriously. I cannot tell you how upset it has made me, that all these young ladies think that I am a rogue.”

Catherine looked up at him. “I do not think you are a rogue, Your Grace, but you must admit that your behavior has been shocking.”

“I will admit no such thing,” he bit back. “You have said it yourself. Plenty of men have to seek marriages of convenience. It is not a shameful thing, in the circles in which we both move. You know that as well as I do, and yet for some reason, you wish to shame me for it.” He paused and forced himself to look into her eyes. “I do not understand you at all, Lady Catherine, I must confess.”

She smiled, and he felt that lurch in his heart again. “I am glad of it,” she said with a pout. “I do not wish to be understood by men such as you.”

He was about to reply when he looked down and realized that their hands were still joined together, from when they had been dancing. He felt the silk of her glove between his fingers and then dropped her hand, almost as if it burned him. How could he not have noticed that he had not let go of it? She would think even worse of him now, he was sure of it.

She glanced at him curiously, then turned away to see how the dance was progressing.

Levi's heart was pounding. He could not go on like this. He must simply try to ignore her, there was nothing else for it. All it had taken was one look, one touch of her hand, to bring back all the memories of how attracted he had been to her when they had first met. He could not allow himself to return to those thoughts. And worse still, her vivacious nature and the way she challenged him made him feel carefree and young again. And he was not that man anymore. Somehow, he had to think of a way to persuade her to stop spreading the rumors, but he could tell that he was defeated tonight.

They danced their final set of the dance, and at the end, he turned to her and bowed. "Lady Catherine, please think about what I have said," he said, then turned and walked away.

He would not waste any more time arguing with her tonight. He was determined to find a way to make her stop spreading these rumors about him, even if it meant that he had to behave in a childish way, just as she was.

But he knew that he could not even allow himself to be in the same room as her without the risk of his thoughts running off to dangerous territory again. He would have to leave the ball entirely. It was the only way to be safe tonight.



Catherine watched as Levi walked away, then made her way across the room to where Isabel and Constance were standing.

“Did the Duke not wish to take a turn about the room with you after your dance?” Constance asked.

Catherine shook her head. “I think he could not get away from me fast enough,” she replied.

“Why on earth would he have asked you to dance, then?” Isabel said, her eyes wide with surprise.

Catherine was about to explain that he had rescued her from the unwanted advances of the Viscount, but she found that she did not want to talk about it. The whole situation had been rather bizarre, to start with, and then infuriating thereafter. She was normally a young lady who was happy to share her feelings and talk to her sister and her best friend about anything and everything, but somehow with Levi, it felt different.

She felt a little confused about her feelings surrounding the situation, and for perhaps the first time in her life, she felt that talking about it would not help.

“I have no idea why he asked me to dance,” she replied instead. “Now, I am in desperate need of some lemonade. Shall I go and fetch us some?”

Constance and Isabel exchanged curious glances, then nodded at her request.

She wandered off in search of refreshments, glad to have some time alone with her thoughts, even amidst the hubbub of the ballroom. She was still convinced that she had done the right thing to warn her friends of the Duke's intentions regarding matrimony, but the tiniest sense of doubt still gnawed at her heart.

Perhaps there was more to him than met the eye, after all?

CHAPTER 10



“I wonder why the gentlemen are taking so long to come in?” Lady Talbot sighed, staring rather crossly at the door of the drawing room.

Catherine followed her gaze, and wondered, too, why they were staying so long at the dining table. Dinner had finished some time ago, and their host, Lady Talbot, was clearly keen to move on to the next stage of the evening, with everyone together in the drawing room.

“Perhaps they have things to discuss that they do not think are fit for young ladies’ ears!” Amelia Sutherland piped up, then burst into a fit of giggles and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Amelia!” her mother, sitting next to her, admonished her. “It should not even cross your mind to think of such a thing. Thank goodness there were no gentlemen here to hear you say it!”

Catherine fought against the urge to roll her eyes. Gentlemen, as always, were allowed to do whatever they liked, while the ladies had to sit around, waiting for them, and behaving

perfectly, even though there were no gentlemen here to see them.

The evening had been pleasant so far, though. Levi was here, of course. He seemed to be at every engagement that Catherine was at, these days. Clearly, he was putting all his efforts into socializing in the hope of finding a wife. Fortunately, though, they had been seated far enough apart at dinner that they had not had to interact with one another, and Catherine had felt relieved at that. She did not want to have to listen to him making conversation with other young ladies and trying to gauge whether they had enough money to be suitable for him as a wife.

Once the gentlemen came into the drawing room, though, she would probably have to talk to him. It would not be possible to avoid him completely without drawing attention. She sighed, and Constance, who was sitting next to her, gave her a strange look.

“Catherine, you have not been yourself all evening,” Constance whispered. “Is something troubling you?”

Catherine shook her head. She could not admit, even to her sister, that the mere presence of Levi in the room was distracting her. She could not put her finger on it, but ever since he had danced with her and rescued her from the lascivious Viscount, she had found that he continued to appear in her mind at the most unexpected times. And when he was present, it was all she could do not to stare at him.

There was a slight hubbub of masculine voices outside the door.

Lady Talbot let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness for that!” she said. “I thought we would be stuck here on our own with no amusement for hours!”

Catherine glanced at Constance, and a flicker of understanding passed between the two sisters. Lady Talbot clearly was rather ridiculous, but her parties were legendary, and no one would willingly refuse an invitation to one of her soirees.

The door swung open, and the gentlemen entered the room, with Lord Talbot leading the way.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, my dear!” he boomed.

Catherine suspected, from the tone of his voice and the rather reddish hue to his cheeks, that he and some of the other gentlemen may have partaken of rather too much brandy in the dining room.

“It is quite all right, My Lord,” Lady Talbot simpered. “We have been chatting amongst ourselves most happily.”

Catherine stifled a laugh, and when she looked up, she saw Levi standing amongst some of the other gentlemen. She could not be sure, but she thought that he had been looking at her, but now he was looking away, focusing his attention on the conversation that was going on around him between the gentlemen as they helped themselves to more brandy from the drinks tray.

She huffed. This could not go on. She must try to think of something else, find some other direction in which to fix her

focus. It was ridiculous to be spending so much time thinking about a gentleman with whom she could not possibly have any kind of future.

“Lady Catherine,” a voice said next to her.

Catherine turned to see Mr. Lawrence Sutherford, her friend Amelia’s older brother, standing next to her.

She smiled in greeting. “Mr. Sutherford. How nice to see you,” she greeted him. “It was a great shame that we were not seated close to one another at dinner.”

“Indeed,” he agreed. He looked at her closely, his brown eyes warm.

Catherine had always liked him but had never seen him as more than the brother of one of her oldest friends. She wondered, now, as he looked at her if perhaps he might be seeing something more in her than his little sister’s childhood playmate.

“I could not help but notice that you seem rather quiet this evening,” he observed.

“Lady Catherine is so rarely quiet, don’t you think?” another voice interjected, and Catherine saw that Levi had now approached and was standing close by.

Mr. Sutherford looked at him in surprise. “Your Grace,” he said with a slight bow. “How nice of you to join us.”

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you,” Levi returned.

Catherine sensed a strange tone in his voice and saw that cold look in his eyes that seemed to be there almost all the time these days. But she was determined not to let him ruin her conversation with Mr. Sutherford.

“I trust that you enjoyed the dinner, Mr. Sutherford?” she asked. Talking about the food was sure to be a safe subject, she thought. “I found the rabbit to be quite delicious.”

Before Mr. Sutherford had a chance to reply, Levi interjected. “It is fascinating, Lady Catherine, that you could have enjoyed eating the rabbit so much, when I am sure that I remember you speaking most passionately about the rights of animals at a recent party. Is that not right?”

Catherine frowned, then forced herself to regain her composure. “I do not think that it is quite fair to equate the two, Your Grace.”

“But how do you think that the rabbit came to be on your plate?” he asked, his eyes wide in mock innocence. “You don’t suppose that there was no hunting or trapping involved at all, that the poor thing just hopped into the kitchen and into the cook’s stewpot?”

“Your Grace, if you will forgive me,” Mr. Sutherford cut in, “I am not sure that this is the most suitable topic of conversation for a lady!”

“The Duke favors poison for badgers,” Catherine said suddenly. “Is that not right, Your Grace? I am sure that is what you said at the dinner party the other night.”

Mr. Sutherford looked between the pair of them, a little baffled, but said nothing.

“I-I cannot quite remember what I said about the badgers,” Levi replied.

Catherine could tell by the look on his face that his temper was flaring. Well, she was not going to let him get away with trying to derail her conversation with another gentleman.

“I am sure that is what you said, even though it must be the most cruel way imaginable to deal with the problem.”

Levi shook his head. “Lady Catherine, I know that you are passionate about this matter, and that should be a credit to you, indeed, but I think that perhaps you do not fully understand the circumstances of the conversation.”

Catherine was about to reply, but she bit her lip. She did not want Mr. Sutherford to think that she was being rude, and to a duke no less.

She forced herself to ignore Levi’s comment and spoke instead to the other gentleman. “You still have not answered my question, Mr. Sutherford. I would be most interested to know which dish was your favorite, from the very fine dinner we have just been served.”

Mr. Sutherland thought for a moment, then smiled. "I do rather like a pudding, you know, Lady Catherine. And that apple tart was most delightful. But it is hard, sometimes, to concentrate on the food when there is so much conversation going on around you, and so many other things to think about."

Had Levi not been standing next to her, Catherine would have been tempted to make a slightly flirtatious comment, perhaps about her skills in pastry making, but she knew that if she did so, Levi would see it as another opportunity to interject and try to make her look foolish.

"I know just what you mean," she replied instead and smiled.

It was extremely hard to concentrate on the conversation with Mr. Sutherland when Levi was looming over her. She felt as if he was waiting for a chance to trip her up at any moment.

"But I return to my earlier point, Lady Catherine," Mr. Sutherland said. "I always think of you as one of the most vivacious young ladies of my acquaintance, and I could not help but notice that you have been more subdued than usual." He looked askance at Levi, and Catherine thought that he, too, would prefer not to have someone else involved in their conversation. "I wondered if there was something troubling you, but perhaps you do not wish to speak of such things now."

Catherine shook her head and was just about to reply when, once again, Levi cut in.

"Lady Catherine likes very much to talk, doesn't she?" he said, staring at her. "No one could be in any doubt about that. I

wonder, too, what it is that is making you more quiet than usual tonight, but I suspect that you will not choose to share it with me either.” His blue eyes were icy now as he looked at her.

Catherine felt her cheeks burning with anger. “Your Grace, I do not know what you are implying,” she said hotly.

Before she could continue, Mr. Sutherford interjected. “Please do excuse me, Lady Catherine,” he said with a cough. “I can see that my sister is standing over there with no drink in her hand, and that will not do at all, I am sure you will agree!”

Catherine nodded. “Of course, you must go to her,” she replied, then watched as he crossed the room towards where Amelia was standing.

Amelia herself was also looking in their direction and quirked an eyebrow a little curiously to see Catherine and Levi standing together.

“What on earth are you playing at?” Catherine hissed, then stood back a little and waited to see how Levi would respond.



“Lady Catherine, I cannot imagine what you mean,” Levi replied, trying to keep his tone even.

He was not sure if he was struggling not to laugh, or not to lose his temper, but there was something about the way she was staring at him that was making it difficult for him to remain composed.

“You were making a fool of me in front of Mr. Sutherford,” she ground out, her voice low but clear. She moved a little towards a corner of the room, where they could not be overheard. “I do not know why you are trying to embarrass me.”

Levi raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure you could work it out if you only set your mind to it. You have much more wit about you than most of the other ladies in polite society.”

She gasped in shock. “You say such awful things, Your Grace. I cannot imagine for a moment that you are in earnest.”

He nodded. “I am perfectly in earnest. If you think about it for a moment, you will realize why I chose to interrupt your tete-a-tete with Mr. Sutherford.”

Catherine chewed on her lip, her brown eyes fixed on his. Levi felt his stomach flip, in spite of himself. She was even prettier than usual when she was angry if that was even possible.

“I cannot work you out,” she said, narrowing her eyes a little. “What can you hope to gain by scaring off any gentleman that I happen to be talking to?”

“You must think your gentlemen admirers very weak-livered, Lady Catherine, if you are worried that they will be scared off by a few comments from the likes of me!”

“I do not think they will be scared off!” she insisted. “But – oh, I do not know. But, please, will you refrain from behaving

in such a way? It is most distracting, trying to have a conversation with someone and being interrupted all the time.”

Levi cocked his head to the side. “I will stop, on one condition.”

“And what might that be, Your Grace?” She smiled at him sweetly, but he could see that the smile did not quite reach her eyes.

“If you stop spreading rumors about me and making every young lady in the ton believe that I am a rogue, then I will stop interrupting your flirting with eligible gentlemen.”

Levi hoped that no one could hear them; he knew that their conversation was risky at best and could even be interpreted as scandalous to the wrong ears. But he had to tell her the truth. He would put up with her games no longer.

“I was not flirting!” Catherine said, her voice a little louder now. “I was simply having a normal conversation, which you insisted on ruining!”

Her eyes were flashing now, and her mouth was apart as she finished speaking. In his mind, Levi suddenly imagined leaning forward and pressing his lips against hers. At least that would stop her talking, he thought to himself a little wryly before that sensation in his stomach returned again as he looked at her.

He shook his head, forcing himself back into reality. These thoughts had no place in his mind. He would never kiss

Catherine Windham, and he would do the best he could to get her to stop ruining his life, no matter what it took.

“Call it whatever you wish, my point remains. I’ll be there for every ‘normal conversation’ you have from now on.”

“You...” Catherine seemed to be trying hard to find the right words. Her stunned face pleased him in ways that he didn’t want to think about.

“Enjoy the rest of the night, My Lady.” A smirk formed on his face without him even realizing it. He walked away, satisfied with himself, leaving Catherine fuming and alone.

You will see what happens when you challenge a duke, My Lady...

CHAPTER II



The next morning, Catherine found herself out in the bright sunshine, enjoying a promenade around the lake with Michael and Constance. She had not spoken to either of them about her conversation with Levi the previous evening, but she was still seething with rage.

How could he have interrupted her conversation with Mr. Sutherford like that? He had made it perfectly clear that he was not interested in her himself, so why would he go out of his way to sabotage her efforts to get to know another gentleman?

The fine weather and pleasant views did nothing to improve her sour mood.

“I wish you would tell me what is bothering you, Catherine,” Constance said.

Catherine sighed. Her sister had already asked her at least twice if she was all right, and she was beginning to feel fatigued by all the questioning.

“I keep telling you, I’m fine,” she insisted.

Michael shook his head “Even I, as a mere man, can tell that something is wrong.”

Catherine did not reply but simply looked straight ahead of her and carried on walking.

She felt a surge of relief when she heard footsteps coming up behind them. It was a popular place to promenade, and there were groups of ladies and gentlemen scattered along the path in small groups. Perhaps some different company would help improve her mood.

She turned to see Mr. Sutherland approaching and greeted him with a broad smile. “My Lord, how pleasant to see you.”

He smiled back at her, a faint look of surprise in his eyes. “I am pleased to see you too. I was wondering, Lady Catherine, if you would like to join me on a boat ride. If we walk a little further along, I am told that there is a boathouse, with some rowing boats tied up outside. We might have a rather entertaining attempt at rowing around the lake. What do you think?”

“That sounds like a splendid idea!” Catherine replied, then glanced at Michael and Constance. “If you think it quite proper?” she added.

Michael nodded. “I see no problem with the plan. You will be within sight on the lake at all times. Unless you would like a chaperone? Perhaps Constance could join you?”

Constance shook her head. “Oh, no! I hate boats! And I can’t swim. Please, do go on your own.”

Mr. Sutherland offered Catherine his arm, and they walked on ahead, towards the boathouse.

“Do you like boats, then, Lady Catherine?” he asked pleasantly.

“I must confess that I have but little experience of them,” Catherine replied. “But I have often wondered what it would be like to sail across the sea to another country.”

“Rather dull and uncomfortable, I should think!” Mr. Sutherland chuckled.

Catherine raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I do not think so. Even if it was uncomfortable, it would be worth it to know that there was the excitement of a new place waiting for you at the end of the journey.”

They arrived at the boathouse, and a voice behind them cut through Catherine’s thoughts. “Ah, Lady Catherine is fantasizing about traveling to foreign climes again, I see!”

Catherine whirled around to see Levi standing behind them.

“Are you following us, Your Grace?” she snapped.

Mr. Sutherland, next to her, flinched, and stared first at her, then at Levi. “Your Grace,” he murmured. “How nice to see you.”

“And you, Sutherland,” Levi replied brusquely. “Were you about to go out on one of these rather rickety-looking boats?”

Catherine nodded. “We were, so if you don’t mind—”

“Sounds marvelous. Perhaps I’ll take one out, too, and join you around the lake!” Levi declared, looking at the boats that were tied up alongside the boahouse. “Which one shall you pick, Sutherland?”

Catherine huffed. How could he be here again, interrupting her conversation with Mr. Sutherland, and now threatening to join them on their boat ride?

“Your Grace, do you not have something else to do? A man as important as you surely does not have the time to waste messing about in boats?”

Levi looked at her with a mocking smile. “Lady Catherine, I am surprised that you are not encouraging me. I thought that it was your belief that people should enjoy themselves more and not be so serious.”

“I do not believe I have ever said such a thing!” Catherine protested. “Why do you continue to provoke me?”

“You know very well why, Lady Catherine,” Levi said, taking a step towards her.

Thankfully, Mr. Sutherford was too busy looking for the right boat to hear them. Goodness only knows what the poor man would have thought if their hushed conversation reached his ears. But even though he couldn't hear them, Catherine was certain from the look of suspicion on his face that he had realized that something was wrong.

She turned to see him stepping towards them. He cleared his throat. “Perhaps it would be better if the pair of you went out on a boat ride together,” he said slowly. “I cannot help but feel I am interrupting something.”

“No, My Lord!” Catherine said. “It is the Duke who is interrupting us!”

“Catherine!” another voice interjected.

She turned to see Michael standing a little distance away. She felt her cheeks burning.

“Constance, perhaps you and Mr. Sutherford would like to go back to where the carriage is waiting,” Michael said calmly. “I shall stay here with Catherine and Levi. I think there are some things we need to discuss.”

Constance nodded and began to walk away, Mr. Sutherford following in her wake, looking mortified.

“You had better both come along with me,” Michael said, his voice low. “I *will* have an explanation as to what is going on here, but I do not want the whole countryside to overhear it.”

Catherine nodded, and Levi, too, acquiesced to Michael’s request. They walked a little way alongside the lake until they had left the boathouse behind them.

Michael clearly had made up his mind that it was safe to speak openly to both of them.

“Now, are you going to tell me what was going on in there?” he asked, glaring at Catherine, and then turning to look at Levi. “I expected better of you both, I must admit.”

Catherine glanced tentatively at Levi, and she could see that he looked almost as ashamed as she did. She wondered if he would admit to exactly what the argument between them was about. She hoped not. The whole situation, she felt, was now rather embarrassing, and she was not sure that she wanted to have to explain everything to her brother-in-law.

“You are quite right,” Levi said, seeming to recover his composure quickly enough to flash a charming smile in Michael’s direction. “It started out as a little banter, and it simply got out of hand.”

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that Levi’s assurances would be enough for Michael to leave it there and not ask any more questions. But from the look on his face, it seemed that her hopes were in vain.

“I had a rather strange conversation with Sutherland last night,” Michael said, glancing between them again. “He said that the pair of you seemed very close, and he wondered whether you might, in fact, be courting.” He paused and frowned at Catherine. “And then I come across you arguing in front of everyone. It is almost as if you are both determined to draw attention to yourselves!”

Catherine felt a surge of irritation. Courting! She and Levi? She could scarcely imagine anything more ridiculous. And yet, when Levi glanced at her a little surreptitiously and held her gaze for a moment, she felt her stomach flip in spite of herself.

She was about to respond to Michael’s comment when he held up a hand and stopped her. “Catherine, I think that if you protest, you will only make the situation worse,” he warned her. “I think Sutherland is right. I have seen other people looking at you too, yesterday evening. And it is just a matter of time before your behavior is the cause of gossip and rumor. And I am sure that that is not what either of you want to happen.”

Levi shook his head. “I, for one, have had enough of rumors and gossip to last me a lifetime,” he replied curtly, then glanced at Catherine again and raised an eyebrow.

She nodded. “I quite agree,” she said, although, inwardly, she was still convinced that she had done nothing wrong when it came to warning other young ladies about Levi’s intentions regarding marriage.

But perhaps she had gone a little too far tonight. Levi certainly had, and she could tell that he regretted it too.

“You are quite right in everything you say, Micheal,” Levi said. “The last thing I would want is for people to think that Lady Catherine and I were courting when, of course, no such thing is the case. You have my word that there will be no repetition of today’s behavior.”

Catherine felt a tiny pang in her heart at his words. She found him irritating to the highest degree, of course, and courting him was the last thing on her mind, but to hear him dismiss the possibility so boldly triggered feelings in her that she had not expected.

“And you, Catherine?” Michael asked sharply, turning to her. “You realize how inappropriate your behavior has been today, and how lucky you are to have not become the subject of some scandalous rumor?”

She nodded. “Indeed, I am keenly aware of it. And I shall ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.”

Michael sighed, looking satisfied that he had achieved his goal, but still a little troubled. “What a strange turn of events,” he mused. “Well, we should get back. But first of all, Levi, I would like to invite you to a house party on my estate. My wife and I will be hosting some of our closest friends for a few days. I think it would do you good to join us.”

Levi nodded. “I would be very pleased to join you.”

Catherine glanced at him again. Try as she might, she could not seem to keep her eyes off him, even though he had annoyed her more than anyone had for a very long time. If

they were thrown together at Constance and Michael's house for a few days, perhaps they could resolve their differences.

“And it will give you both a chance to learn how to behave properly towards one another,” Michael added, glancing at them both. “I have no idea what the cause of your argument was today, but you must put it behind you and behave civilly towards one another. Catherine, I will not speak to Neil about this now, but if I see anything else going on that concerns me, then I will have to tell him. I am sure that you understand that?”

Catherine nodded. She could not think of anything worse than having her brother find out about this. If nothing else, she hated to bother him when he was so busy with the duties of the dukedom. But she knew also that she would be embarrassed if he knew how she and Levi had been speaking to each other.

She resolved to do as Michael asked.

“I promise, I will be on my best behavior at the party, Michael,” she said earnestly, and hoped that he would believe her.

“Well, we shall see,” Michael murmured. “I will be watching. Now, Catherine, you had better go back to the carriage, or people will no doubt find something else to gossip about. Levi, you stay out here for a moment, please. I have something else I wish to say to you.”



Once Catherine had gone back inside, Michael returned his attention to Levi.

“Now, we are old friends, Levi, and I will say this only once,” Michael began, fixing Levi with a steely gaze. “Catherine is my sister-in-law, and I will not allow her to be insulted.”

Levi was about to interject, to defend himself, when he realized that that would be quite the wrong thing to do. It was better, he knew, just to acknowledge that he had behaved badly, and promise to do better in the future. And besides, he did not want Catherine to get into trouble with her brother.

“Please forgive me, Michael. It will not happen again.”

Michael nodded. “You had better keep your word on this, Levi. I will not mention it again, but please remember what I said.”

“Indeed,” Levi agreed. “And I am grateful for the invitation to your house party.”

Michael shrugged. “It will give you and Catherine a chance to clear the air, perhaps, and maybe you will both meet other people to take your mind off whatever is going on between the pair of you.”

Levi frowned. What was it that was going on between them? He did not even know how to describe it, other than that he was distracted by thoughts of Catherine far more than he wanted to admit. But she had seemed to be hell-bent on destroying his reputation, and with so little justification. How could he let that go?

No, Michael was right. The best thing to do was to set the whole thing aside, behave cordially towards Catherine, and continue his quest to find a suitable wife.

“I have simply allowed myself to be rather petty,” Levi said. “As I said, it was simply banter between us that went a little too far. I will stick to my word, I promise you that, my friend.”

Michael nodded. “Well, I am going back to the carriage, and then home. I feel like I need a glass of brandy after all that. Will you join us?”

Levi shook his head. “I will stay here for a few more minutes,” he replied. “I am enjoying the fresh air.”

“As you wish.” Michael turned on his heel, leaving Levi alone on at the water’s edge.

Levi looked up at the clear blue sky and reflected on the events of the day. He had been petty, of course, in his interruptions and interjections into Lady Catherine’s conversation with Mr. Sutherford. He had wanted to annoy her and to embarrass her, as she had annoyed and embarrassed him. But perhaps there was something else at play.

Was he jealous that another gentleman was paying her attention? He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. He must try harder, he resolved, to stop being distracted by Lady Catherine. He had already accepted that he could not marry her, and that should have been the end of it. But somehow, thoughts of her lingered in his mind, even when he was not with her.



Later, once they had returned home, Catherine went into the drawing room and found Constance.

“Is everything all right?” Constance asked, looking at her with concern on her face. “What did Michael want to talk to you and the Duke about?”

Catherine flinched. If her sister had noticed the three of them going outside together, then perhaps others had too? She glanced around the room to see if anyone was looking at her strangely, but everyone seemed absorbed in their own conversations.

“Oh, he just wanted to talk to us about the house party. To the Duke, I mean.”

Catherine felt her cheeks warming when she realized that she had talked of herself and Levi as *us* without even thinking about it. It meant nothing, of course. Just a slip of the tongue.

“I am sure I had already told you about it,” Constance said, frowning.

Catherine shrugged. “You may very well have done, Constance. I am finding that I am rather forgetful at the moment.”

“Are you sure that there is nothing wrong?” Constance asked. “You are behaving most oddly this evening. Would you like to

go home?”

Catherine shook her head. “No, indeed. I am quite well. There is nothing wrong.” She looked around the room again. “Is Mr. Sutherford still here? I was rather enjoying my conversation with him.”

Constance shook her head. “He had to leave a little while ago. He said something about having to leave early in the morning on a business trip.”

“Oh,” Catherine replied, feeling a stab of disappointment.

She had thought that he had seemed a little interested in her and that perhaps he might have made sure to say goodbye to her before leaving, but it seemed that she had misinterpreted the situation. Maybe he had been put off by witnessing her strange encounter with Levi, or maybe there was more to it than that. Perhaps he, like every other gentleman in the ton, it seemed, was more interested in a young lady’s dowry than her conversation.

She saw Levi coming through the door from the balcony. He must have decided to come back with Michael, after all. He blinked as he re-entered the room, his eyes readjusting to the light inside. She wondered if he would come over and speak to her. Perhaps he would keep his distance. It would seem safer, perhaps, after what Michael had said to them both.

But her heart clenched a little in her chest when she realized that he was coming towards her.

Constance glanced at her curiously, then stepped away, towards where Michael was standing.

Catherine smiled at Levi as he approached.

“Lady Catherine,” he greeted her. “I wanted to tell you that I am very much looking forward to the house party at Lord Vaughan’s home.”

She nodded. “I am looking forward to it too. It will be pleasant to be able to spend so much time amongst friends.”

Levi held her gaze, his blue eyes intense. “And do you think that we can be friends again, Lady Catherine?” he asked, his voice low.

Catherine could see Michael watching them from the other side of the room. She tried very hard to keep her composure, despite the intensity of his stare. “I am sure of it, Your Grace,” she replied. “I think that the best thing for us to do is to resolve not to argue at all at the house party, not even in jest, and then we will ensure that we do not give anyone anything to gossip about.”

Levi nodded. “You are quite right,” he replied. “As I said, I have had quite enough of gossip and rumors for a lifetime.”

Catherine was about to reply that if he did not want to be gossiped about, then he should not behave in such a way as to mislead young ladies about his intentions towards them and that he should not have insulted her the way that he had, but she bit her lip.

Levi looked at her with a hint of amusement in his eyes. “Were you about to say something, Lady Catherine?”

She shook her head. “No, indeed, Your Grace, I have nothing further to add. What you have said is very wise, and very true.”

He gave a wry smile. “I am quite certain that you do not think I am wise, but I would not want to be accused of arguing with you, so of course, in the spirit of our truce, I shall let it go. Now, where is that gentleman with whom you were conversing earlier when I so rudely interrupted you? I am sure that I should leave you alone now so that you can recommence your chat with him.”

Catherine shook her head. “I am afraid, Your Grace, that you may have to entertain me a little longer, as Mr. Sutherford has left the party. My sister tells me that he has urgent business tomorrow necessitating an early start.”

Levi frowned. “Well, I must confess that I do empathize with him a little there. Often, I am called to business matters far earlier in the morning than I would like. But it is a shame that he has gone. Perhaps you will be able to renew your acquaintance with him again soon.”

Catherine looked at him and wondered what he was really thinking. Was he really sorry that one of her potential suitors had left the party, or was he simply saying so for want of something else to say, or to try and make her feel more comfortable around him?

She blinked and looked away. His gaze was almost too piercing for comfort, and she could hardly bear it.

“I will return to my sister, I think,” she said, a little abruptly. “I hope that you enjoy the rest of the evening, Your Grace.” She turned and walked away towards where Constance and Michael were standing, chatting with some other guests.

She stood quietly on the edge of the conversation, wondering what it was about Levi that was causing her so much confusion and distraction. How was she going to manage to behave normally at the house party when he was there all the time? She would simply have to force herself to ignore him as much as possible, without seeming too obvious, she decided.

Yes, that was probably the best option. She would try to be friendly and behave normally, but if that was too much to bear, then she would simply have to avoid him.

CHAPTER 12



The first evening of the house party had arrived, and everyone was gathered in the drawing room before dinner.

Catherine stood with Isabel and chatted with the guests. She had decided as she was getting ready that she would try her hardest to be at her most engaging, most vivacious behavior this evening. As the sister of the hostess of the party, almost everyone already knew her, and she felt quite confident that that party would go well.

Isabel had already asked her if she had any suitors in mind from the list of guests that Constance and Michael had shared with them that morning at breakfast, but Catherine had dismissed the idea, saying that she wanted to concentrate only on having a good time, and not worrying about finding a husband.

But now, as she chatted with Lord Thomas, she felt Isabel's eyes on her.

When Lord Thomas moved away to speak to someone else, Isabel nudged her gently. "You see, you may well have said that you were not interested in finding a suitor during the

party, but I suspect that you did not mean it. This is the perfect opportunity to get to know a gentleman properly. It is much better than those fleeting encounters in a ballroom.”

Catherine laughed. “I did mean it!” she protested. “I have no such agenda this week, I promise you. And Lord Thomas is much more interested in Lady Adeline, in any case.”

She had not failed to notice that as soon as the lady in question had entered the drawing room, Lord Thomas had politely made his excuses and left her to go and greet Lady Adeline instead.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that,” Isabel said, looking across to where the two of them were now chatting with their heads close together on the other side of the room.

“Do not be sorry on my account,” Catherine reassured. “I do not wish to come in between a couple forming a real attachment. Far from it. I only wish that more matches were made on such a basis in Society.”

“I am convinced, you know, that it is possible to make a sensible match and also to fall in love,” Isabel admitted quietly, her eyes flitting quickly over to where Ambrose was standing talking to Neil and Lydia.

Catherine smiled. “You and my brother and sister have all been very lucky in that respect. And perhaps I will be too, in due course. But as I said, I am determined not to think about such things this week. Not for myself, anyway.”

Isabel looked at her shrewdly. “I think one day you will find that someone comes along and surprises you, Catherine.”

Catherine laughed again, throwing her head back and allowing the moment to immerse her. She felt that perhaps she would like to be surprised one day, but also she felt equally sure that that day was not likely to come soon.



Levi stood on the other side of the room, sipping his champagne slowly and listening to the conversation around him. He thought, as he listened to Neil and Lord Talbot discussing some issue regarding the boundary of Neil’s estate, that he probably would learn a lot during this week if he listened to gentlemen who were more experienced in managing an estate than he was. And although in the past he would have been much livelier and more involved in the conversation, today he was happy to stay on the fringes of things and listen.

He heard a peel of laughter coming from the other side of the room, and he looked over to see Catherine laughing with her friend, the Countess of Hertford. He had been aware of her presence in the room since he had arrived, but he had been trying very hard not to look at her, despite the strong urge that he felt to do exactly that. But now that he had heard her laughter, he could not tear his eyes away from her.

She looked perfect in an ivory gown that suited her complexion perfectly. Her hair was pinned back, but her face was framed with perfect curls. He wondered for a moment what it would be like to touch one of them with his fingertips, imagining its softness. He thought about how she would respond if he were to be close enough to do that.

He realized that he was staring at her, and at that moment, their eyes met across the room.

Levi's heart lurched in his chest. He had promised himself that he would keep his distance from her, and now she had caught him staring at her. It would not surprise him at all if she was annoyed to find him looking at her.

He knew he should avert his eyes and return his focus to the conversation going on around him. But still, he could not look away.

And as their gazes remained locked together, he watched as her lips curled into a smile. She had seen that he was looking at her, and she did not look angry or horrified. Instead, they shared a smile across the room, before finally looking away and rejoining the conversations around them.

But Levi found that he could not concentrate on what Neil was saying. He took another sip of his drink and allowed himself a wry smile.

How on earth was he going to concentrate on finding a suitable wife with a sizeable dowry when he kept on allowing himself to be distracted by Lady Catherine Windham every time he laid eyes on her?



Just before dinner, Catherine saw Neil approaching with a gentleman she had not met before.

“Catherine, I wanted to introduce you to Philip Seymour, the Earl of Stonewich,” Neil said, then turned to the gentleman. “Stonewich, this is my sister, Lady Catherine, who I was telling you about.”

Catherine smiled as demurely as she could, while the Earl bowed in greeting.

“Lady Catherine, it is a pleasure to meet you,” he said, returning her smile. “I can see that your brother’s reports of your beauty are not at all exaggerated.”

Catherine flushed and turned to look at her brother.

What on earth could Neil have said to this man? She hardly dared to think of it. But it was clear that he was being introduced to her as a potential suitor.

She looked at him as closely as she dared and concluded that he was perhaps not handsome, but he was pleasant-looking, with green eyes and fair hair. He was not much taller than her, but then she recognized that she herself was unusually tall for a young lady.

“Catherine, I think that Constance has seated Lord Stonewich next to you at dinner, and it is time to go to the dining room now. Perhaps you would be so kind as to escort my sister into dinner, Stonewich?”

Lord Stonewich offered Catherine his arm. “I would be delighted if you will permit it, Lady Catherine.”

She smiled and took his arm.

A few minutes later, all the guests were seated at the dinner table, waiting for the first course to be brought out. Catherine knew that her sister had put an enormous amount of effort into working with the cook to plan the menu for the duration of the house party and that this first meal was expected to be particularly lavish. She hoped that nothing had gone wrong in the kitchen today and that her sister would be pleased with how the meal progressed.

“So, Lady Catherine, I trust that you have been having a pleasant evening so far?” Lord Stonewich asked.

She nodded. “I know that my sister and her husband are very excited to have so many friends here with us.”

“Well, I am very lucky to be here, as I have only recently met your brother, Neil,” Lord Stonewich replied.

“Oh?” Catherine said.

It was unusual, she had to admit, for there to be a new face among their acquaintance, and she welcomed the chance to get to know somebody new.

“Well, it is rather a sad story, so I will try to make it as quick as I can. The truth of it is that I was not expected to inherit, but my uncle, the late Earl of Stonewich, and his son, my cousin, who was supposed to inherit the title, died rather suddenly while they were traveling overseas. So, I had to turn my life

upside down a few months ago and leave my quiet country life to come and take over the estate at Stonewich.”

“Indeed?” Catherine asked. “I am very sorry for your loss, My Lord.”

“Thank you, Lady Catherine,” Lord Stonewich said. “But the loss is not so great for me. I did not know that part of my family well. There was some argument between my father and his brother many years ago, so I do not grieve their loss. But it has been something of an adjustment, I confess.”

“I can imagine,” Catherine replied.

She thought for a moment how similar his situation was to Levi’s, who she knew had inherited his dukedom rather unexpectedly. But it seemed that Lord Stonewich was adjusting to the change a little better than Levi, who seemed so much changed since taking on the title.

“Yes, my life has changed rather a lot,” Lord Stonewich observed. “But then I look around a table such as this, where I am surrounded by such fine people, and I think that life could be worse.”

Catherine smiled. “I always think that it is better to try and see the better side of things when life throws surprises at us.”

Lord Stonewich laughed. “I could not agree more, Lady Catherine.” He paused and moved to the side while a footman topped up their wine glasses, then raised his glass to hers. “In fact, I will drink to that. To seeing the better side of things!”

She clinked her glass against his and took a sip of her wine, thinking as she did so that his company was rather enjoyable.



Levi looked on from the other side of the table as Catherine chatted with Lord Stonewich, who Levi knew was a newcomer into Society, having been briefly introduced to him in the drawing room.

He could see that she enjoyed the conversation, as she was smiling and laughing at the man's jokes. He remembered with a slight pang of guilt how he had behaved the last time he had witnessed her chatting with another gentleman, but resolved that he would not repeat that behavior.

He had promised Michael that he would do better during the course of the house party, and he found that although he felt a pang of jealousy watching her with the Earl, he also did not want to do anything to ruin her enjoyment of the moment.

He was rather relieved, though, when the meal was over and the ladies withdrew into the drawing room. The men did not stay long on their own in the dining room; Michael seemed keen for everyone to be together, saying that he knew that Constance wanted all the guests to play cards together tonight.

In fact, Levi barely had time to finish his brandy before Michael was ushering them all out of the dining room. Michael was clearly not a man who wished to keep his wife waiting, and Levi had to admit to himself, as they entered the drawing room, that he much preferred being in the same room

as Lady Catherine, even if she was deep in conversation with another gentleman.

CHAPTER 13



The card tables had been set up in the drawing room, and there was a hubbub of noise as various games of whist were underway.

Catherine was seated opposite Constance, and she looked down at the set of cards in her hands and let out a soft sigh of annoyance. She knew that her selection was not strong and that her sister was likely to beat her, yet again.

Constance was famed for her skill at cards; she was almost always the best player at the table. It had long been a bone of contention between the sisters, as Catherine was naturally competitive but rarely able to gain the advantage over her older sister.

“You look perturbed, Catherine,” Constance observed, a teasing note in her voice.

Catherine huffed. “I am not in the least bit perturbed,” she retorted. “It is your turn. Let us see what you have got.”

Michael was standing behind Constance, with a clear view of her cards, and smiling proudly. Catherine felt a flare of

irritation. The cards in all the players' hands at the beginning of the game were simply a matter of luck and nothing else. Why should Michael be looking as if he were so impressed with his wife's skills when there was no skill behind it?

Constance turned to Michael and smiled at him. "What advice would you give me, my dear?"

Michael laughed. "I would not dare to advise you, my love. I am sure that you know the perfect way to play your hand."

Constance giggled. "Well, of course, I do, but..."

Michael placed a hand on her shoulder. "I am sure you do not need my help."

Catherine watched the two of them together and felt a strange combination of gratitude and envy. She knew that her sister's happiness with Michael had not been easily won.

Constance had never found it easy to converse with gentlemen, and in the end, much to everyone's astonishment when it had been eventually revealed, she had embarked on a fake courtship with Michael to try to attract other suitors, but the pair of them had fallen in love. And Catherine was glad to see her happy, of course. But she wished for the same for herself, and with each Season that passed, her hopes faded a little.

She felt a presence next to her and looked up to see Lord Stonewich standing beside her.

“Will you permit me to see your cards, Lady Catherine?” he asked.

She nodded and spread the cards out so that he could see the whole of her hand. He arched an eyebrow and stood back, waiting for Constance to play her hand.

As Catherine had predicted, her sister played a high card in the lead suit, and she knew that the players coming after her were unlikely to be able to match it. The game moved around the table until it was Catherine’s turn. She had no card higher than Constance’s, so the decision remained as to whether she would discard one of her lower cards, or play a card from the trump suit.

She glanced at Lord Stonewich, awaiting his advice. It galled her slightly to turn to him in this way when she knew that she was perfectly capable of deciding which move to make next by herself, but she sensed that he would appreciate the gesture, and she knew that she had to go along with some of these games in order to make herself attractive to gentlemen.

He shook his head. “I think all is lost, Lady Catherine.” He sighed.

She nodded. “I thought as much too.” She threw her cards down on the table in front of her. “You win again, Constance!”

“Catherine, you are such a bad loser!” Constance chuckled. “Honestly, I sometimes wonder if we should ban you from the card table altogether. Would you prefer to play the pianoforte for us, to amuse us, while we continue with another game?”

“No, indeed!” Catherine replied hotly. She felt a sudden surge of determination to play again, and to win this time.

“Ah, Levi!” Michael greeted the Duke, who had just appeared next to the card table they had gathered around. “They are just about to deal out a new game. Will you join in?”

Levi glanced at Catherine and then nodded. “I would like that very much.”

Constance shifted a little to the side to make space for him, and he sat down opposite Catherine. Constance deftly shuffled the cards and dealt out a new hand to everyone, and the game began again.

Levi played before Catherine, and when it came to her turn, she grinned broadly and placed a six of hearts on top of his five.

“There!” she said triumphantly. “You see? Luck is on my side, at last.”

Levi laughed. “There is a long way to go in the game yet, Lady Catherine. And your sister has not played yet. We all know that she is the luckiest player in the *ton*.”

Catherine glowered. “Indeed, Constance has all the luck. I do believe that it is not fair at all.”

Sure enough, Constance played a higher card, and the game went around the table until it was Levi’s turn again. He placed

a king on top of the pile of cards in the middle and turned to Catherine.

“There! Do you think you can beat me now?”

She stared at the cards in her hand, trying to work out what to do next.

“Perhaps you could play the trump?” Lord Stonewich whispered from where he was still standing behind her.

“Why would I do that?” she whispered back, preparing to place an ace on top of Levi’s cards.

“Because...” Lord Stonewich trailed off, seeing the look of triumph on Constance’s face.

She laid down an ace from the trump suit. “I think that means that I am the winner again!”

Catherine let out a groan of disappointment. “I just want to win once, that’s all! It is so unfair!”

“Perhaps if you had listened to Lord Stonewich’s advice, then you would have done,” Levi said, a teasing note in his voice. But Catherine saw that the look in his eyes was intense, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Was he jealous of the attention that Lord Stonewich was paying her?

She pushed the thoughts out of her mind. Levi's thoughts and feelings were entirely irrelevant at this moment in time. The most important thing was to win the next game of cards.

Constance dealt yet another hand, and Catherine sighed in frustration to see the selection of low-scoring cards in her hand. She knew that she would not win this game either.

"Lady Catherine, you look thunderous," Levi noted. "I would not want to get on your bad side tonight!"

Behind him, Michael coughed, and Catherine noticed Levi glancing behind him at Michael and giving him a reassuring smile. They would not argue, even over cards. They had given their word.

"I think that perhaps cards are not my strong suit," Catherine said with a weak smile.

Behind her, Lord Stonewich barked out a laugh. "A fine joke, Lady Catherine!"

She smiled demurely, trying to suppress her irritation. The game continued, and Levi laid down a king just before Catherine was due to make her move.

"Come now, Lady Catherine, I know that this round is yours!" Levi said, a hint of a challenge in his eyes.

Catherine shook her head. "It is all over for me, yet again." She placed her cards down on the table and took a sip of her wine.

"I am sure that you have many other talents," Levi replied, holding her gaze across the table.

"I think that you flatter me, Your Grace," Catherine said.

"No, I am sure that is not the case. We hear all the time how accomplished young ladies are, and I am sure that you are no different. It does not matter a fig that you are not especially good at cards."

"I just would like to win against Constance, just once," Catherine complained. "But I feel that it will never happen. I do not think I have ever beaten her at any card game, not since we were playing commerce in the nursery."

"There, you see! You can add this to your list of accomplishments. Champion snap player!"

Catherine laughed. She was about to say that she thought that this particular skill would not help her attract suitors, but she held back. Of course, it would be inappropriate to say such a thing out loud to Levi.

She looked at him across the table and saw that his face had lit up with a smile as their conversation progressed. She felt something stir in her chest as she looked at him.

“Tell me, Your Grace, what do you think are the most important accomplishments for a young lady in polite society?” she asked him.

She was not even sure why they were talking about this particular topic, but she was enjoying herself too much to stop.

“Well, you already know that I am a keen rider, and I think that any young lady should be able to keep up with a man on horseback,” Levi replied.

“You see, this is what I mean about winning!” Catherine cried, a hint of a challenge in her voice. “Gentlemen can ride around the countryside as fast as they like on their horses, or they can hunt, or shoot, or fish, or play any manner of sports. There are so many avenues available for them where they can enjoy that sense of triumph. But for young ladies, all we have are cards.” She let out another huff of irritation. “And I am forever destined to be the loser at the card table.”

Levi looked at her thoughtfully. “You like to win, then?”

She nodded. “Of course! Who doesn’t?”

The bubbling sound of his laughter in response to her comment made her feel a surge of joy.

“I suspect, Lady Catherine, that not every young lady is so fixated on winning as you are,” Levi replied with a grin.

“Well, perhaps I need to learn some other games, and see if I can find my true talent,” Catherine returned.

“Or you can learn to ride a horse as fast as possible. Perhaps one day we could have a race?”

Catherine laughed now. “How little you understand about the constraints placed on young ladies, Your Grace,” she retorted. “If I were to be seen racing across a field on horseback with you, what do you think everyone would say about me? What do you think my brother would say? It would not be considered in the least bit ladylike.”

“Well, perhaps it would be seen as more ladylike than hurling the card table over in a rage when your sister beats you!”

“I would never do such a thing!” Catherine replied, giggling. “I keep my frustration checked.”

Levi looked at her again, and she saw a hint of that intensity in his eyes again. “I do not like to think that you are frustrated by your life, Lady Catherine,” he said, lowering his voice a little.

“I-I would not go so far as to say that I am frustrated,” she replied. “But there are many things that young ladies are not allowed to do, which I feel is rather unfair.”

“Like hunting?” Levi asked, raising an eyebrow. “I am sure that you would be permitted to join the hunt if you wanted to, but I thought that you did not approve of beastly men hunting defenseless animals?”

Catherine held his gaze. “I think, Your Grace, that it would be better for us not to speak of that particular topic again. I am sure that my brother-in-law would not approve.”

She looked up for the first time in a little while to check if Michael was close by. To her astonishment, she saw that everyone else had left the table and wandered away to observe other games that were taking place. Even Lord Stonewich had disappeared.

“Oh, everyone is gone!” she said.

Levi stared at her. “You seem angry to observe this, Lady Catherine.”

“Angry? Why, yes, I suppose I am!” she admitted, frowning.

She had thought that Lord Stonewich would have stayed close, but then she realized that she and Levi had been so absorbed in their conversation that others may have felt that their company was no longer wanted, or needed.

“I am sorry to have distracted you, Lady Catherine,” Levi said, “but forgive me that I cannot help but be a little amused at your fury.”

“And why should my fury amuse you?” she bit back.

“Because, My Lady, you look simply charming when you are angry, and I must confess that I enjoy it very much, even though I know I should not say such a thing.”

Catherine stared at Levi, at the smile on his face, and realized with a jolt that he was, by far, the most handsome man she had ever set eyes on. He was just as handsome now as he had been when they had first met at the wedding, and as he smiled at her, she saw a glimmer of the old Levi in his face.

The man that he had been before the pressures of the dukedom weighed him down and made him so hopeless and cynical. He was still there, the man that she had been so attracted to all those months ago. And she could not tear her eyes away from his face.

CHAPTER 14



Before Catherine could stop herself, she leaned forward across the table, still looking into Levi's eyes.

"You are just like you were when we first met, Your Grace," she said, smiling softly. "But so much of the time, since we have met again, you seem to have changed so much. You do not seem to have that same *joie de vivre* that I once—" She stopped herself before she could say that it was his *joie de vivre* that she had found so captivating when they had first met. "You seem so changed, Your Grace. What has been the cause of this?"

Levi's smile faltered as he listened to her. "Lady Catherine, I am not sure we should be discussing such things here..." He looked around a little cautiously.

"I am not worried," she replied. "Everyone is engrossed in the card games, and it is not as if we are arguing or shouting at one another, is it?"

He gave a weak smile and nodded. "I suppose you are right."

“So, what has been the cause of the change in you, Your Grace? I must confess that it leaves me most confused.”

Levi shook his head. “The truth of it is very simple, My Lady,” he replied. “I have simply realized that the reality of my life now is far crueler than I had previously imagined.”

Catherine frowned. “What do you mean, Your Grace?”

“I mean that I have no freedom now, to make the choices that I would have made before.” Levi paused for a moment. “I know that I sound ungrateful, that I sound ridiculous, perhaps, but I did not want to be a duke, and now, here I am, with a dukedom to manage and all the pressures and restrictions that I did not ever think I would have to face. And there are choices now that must be made differently from how I ever imagined.”

Catherine shook her head. “I do not think it needs to define you like this, though, Your Grace, if you will permit me to say so. I am only a young lady, of course, so it is quite feasible that I do not understand the least thing about it, but surely you can still have those freedoms, even though you are now a duke? It makes no sense that a man in your position would not be able to make the choices in life that he really wants to make.”

Levi sighed. “It is not as simple as that, Lady Catherine. Forgive me, but I would prefer to talk of it no longer.”

Catherine saw a hint of pain crossing his deep blue eyes before he looked away from her, and she saw his gaze falling upon Miss Elizabeth Talbot, who was standing next to a card table on the other side of the room.

She sighed. Of course, he was looking for a lady with a large dowry, and she understood the reasons for it. But she wished that somehow he could at least approach his situation with a little more acceptance.



Levi fought against the wave of despair that was threatening to engulf him. He knew, now, that he could not manage his feelings when he was around Lady Catherine. As they had played cards together and then talked afterward, he had felt all the cares on his shoulders being lifted away, almost as if he had become his old self again, before the burdens of the dukedom had been thrust upon him.

He had to admit to himself now as he looked at her sitting opposite him that he had allowed himself to imagine things that he should never have permitted to enter his mind. The painful truth of the situation remained unchanged. He could never court her, could never marry her. She had no dowry, and that had to be his focus when seeking a wife.

He tore his eyes away from her and looked at the group of young ladies gathered around the card table on the other side of the room. None of them made him feel the way that Lady Catherine did, but he had to accept that his feelings were irrelevant. He had to face the facts. He could not follow his heart.

There was no way he could achieve his goal if he kept on allowing himself to be distracted by her. And yet, the thought of not being able to spend time with her made his heart clench with regret. But there was no other option. He would have to avoid her.

Keeping his distance from Lady Catherine was the only way he was going to be able to concentrate on finding a suitable wife.



The following morning, after breakfast, Catherine, Isabel, and Ambrose took a walk around the gardens. Catherine had been wanting to speak to her friend privately since the previous evening, but the breakfast room had been busy with guests, and an opportunity had not arisen, so she had suggested that they go outside and enjoy the bright sunshine of the morning.

They were walking around the lake, and Ambrose was with them, but Catherine considered him to be a close enough friend to not be embarrassed to speak her mind in front of him.

“I have been wanting to ask your opinion about the Duke,” Catherine said finally, having been considering her words for a few minutes before finally speaking.

“The Duke of Coltfoot?” Isabel asked, looking a little confused.

“Of course,” Catherine replied. “Which other duke could I mean?”

Isabel glanced at Ambrose and raised an eyebrow. Ambrose said nothing, but Catherine felt a flicker of irritation at the knowing look passing between her friend and her husband.

“Well, what is it that you would like to ask about the Duke?” Isabel asked.

Their shoes crunched on the gravel path as they walked along while Catherine paused for a moment, choosing her words carefully.

“He has been avoiding me,” she said eventually. “After the card game last night, he did not speak to me again for the whole evening, and then this morning at breakfast, I am sure that he waited to see where I was going to sit down at the table before choosing a place for himself as far away as possible.” She let out a sigh. “I do not know if I have done something to offend him, and I wondered whether he had said anything to either of you that might shed a little light on what might be going on in his mind.”

Ambrose chuckled. “It never ceases to amaze me how much time you young ladies spend trying to work out what is going on in the minds of gentlemen. The honest truth is most probably that there is very little going on at all. Most men are simple creatures, thinking only of food and comfort and sport.”

Catherine shook her head. “I do not think that is true of the Duke. I think there is something troubling him, and perhaps I am the cause of it?”

She did not like to think that anything she had done might be causing distress to Levi, but as she spoke, even to her closest friends, she wondered if she might be sharing rather too much.

Isabel pondered over her question for a moment before replying, “I wonder, Catherine, that you are so distracted by the Duke when there are perhaps other gentlemen who should be occupying your thoughts?”

Catherine frowned. "What do you mean?"

Isabel's eyes widened a little. "Surely you must know that I mean Lord Stonewich!"

"Ah, yes, Lord Stonewich."

Catherine remembered, with a slight flush of shame, how she had forgotten about the Earl completely the previous evening when she had been chatting with Levi and then turned to see that he had vanished.

What on earth must he think of her?

"He seemed to be very attentive to you last evening," Ambrose observed.

Catherine nodded.

It was true that even after the incident at the card table, Lord Stonewich had continued to pay close attention to her, making sure that she had had everything she needed throughout the evening and engaging her in conversation for much of the remaining duration of the party.

"Catherine, surely you must realize that Neil introduced him to you as a potential suitor?" Isabel pointed out.

Catherine nodded. "I am not quite so naive as all that," she replied. "And he is a perfectly pleasant gentleman, but..."

"But somehow you are still preoccupied with the Duke?" Ambrose prompted.

Catherine sighed. Ambrose was right, of course, but she was hesitant to admit it.

"Catherine, you must admit that Lord Stonewich would be a perfect match for you," Isabel went on. "He is good-looking, he has a title, and he seems to be perfectly pleasant. What is holding you back? He should be the one taking up all your attention right now, not the Duke."

Ambrose looked at her pensively. "Catherine, it cannot be that you would prefer to marry a duke rather than an earl? I did not think that you would be so swayed by status and such things. I thought that you did not care about all that."

Catherine gasped. "Of course, I do not care about such things!" she insisted.

She realized, too late, that Ambrose was implying that she was forming an attachment to Levi. How, indeed, could he think anything else after what she had admitted? She felt a sense of panic now that her secret was out.

"It is simply that I think he is keeping his distance from me so that I do not find him out," she said.

“Find him out? What on earth do you mean?” Ambrose asked.

“I mean that I think he might be trying to trick another lady, as he has done before,” she replied quickly.

Ambrose laughed. “Catherine, I know that you have a vivid imagination, but surely you must see that your theories about Levi are nonsense?”

She shook her head. “No, that is not true. I am convinced that he has set his sights on another of the young ladies present at the house party – perhaps poor Miss Elizabeth Talbot – and he is bent on persuading her that he is in love with her when all he is really interested in is her dowry. And that is why he keeps his distance from me, as he is afraid that I will find him out again.”

Ambrose sighed. “Catherine, I’m afraid that I do not believe a word of your explanation. And rather like playing cards, lying is not your strong suit.” He stopped on the path and dropped a kiss on Isabel’s cheek. “I must go back to the house and speak to Michael about the plans for this afternoon. I think he wants to arrange a fishing trip for the gentlemen if the weather holds out.”

He paused and glanced at Catherine. “And I suspect that the next part of this conversation will progress more freely if I am not present. Catherine, I hope that you work out what it is that you really want before it is too late.”

And with that, he turned and walked back towards the house, leaving Isabel and Catherine standing together, looking out

over the lake, the morning sunshine bouncing off the ripples in the water.

“I do not understand what Ambrose is implying,” Catherine said a little irritably, once he was out of earshot.

Isabel turned to face her. “Catherine, are you being truly honest with yourself about your feelings for the Duke?”

Catherine turned away, staring out at the water. “I do not know what you mean,” she replied. “I simply want to save other ladies from being taken in by him.”

“And you truly believe that is what he is trying to do?”

Catherine sighed. “I do not know. That is what I thought, but now I am not so sure. He is not like he used to be when we first met. He has changed so much since becoming a duke.”

“Catherine, it seems to me that your thoughts are very much fixated on him. So much so that there is no space in your mind, or perhaps even your heart, to consider any other suitors.”

The flurry of thoughts and feelings coursing around Catherine’s mind and heart at that moment was almost too much to bear. Could it be true, what her friend was saying? She knew that she had been unable to keep her eyes off him every time she had been in the same room as him. And this had been the case even when she knew she should have been focusing her attention on other people with whom she was conversing, notably Lord Stonewich.

“It is true that I think of him often,” she said softly.

“And we all knew that there was something between you when you first met at Constance’s wedding,” Isabel added gently.

Catherine nodded. “I had never met anyone like him before,” she admitted. “He was so joyful and so full of life. And then he had to leave so suddenly, and we did not see him again for months, and now he is so changed. I scarcely recognize the man he used to be, but then sometimes, when he smiles, or when I make him laugh, there is a glimmer of the man he used to be...”

Isabel let out a low chuckle. “Catherine, I think that Ambrose is right. You need to be honest with yourself about your feelings for the Duke.”

Catherine nodded. “Perhaps you are right. Now that I have spent some more time with him, it seems that I still feel that same attraction I felt for him all those months ago when we first met. Perhaps he is still the same man inside, in spite of everything.”

“Perhaps you are right, dear Catherine,” Isabel said. “Now, shall we return to the house and see what Constance has planned for us this afternoon, since we cannot join the gentlemen on their fishing trip?”

Catherine nodded, and they walked slowly together across the lawn towards the house. Perhaps Levi would find some clarity while he was out beside the water this afternoon? She hoped,

in her heart, that he could find some way out of the sadness that seemed to be swallowing him up before her very eyes.

CHAPTER 15



Levi took a deep breath and inhaled the cool night air. The day had been busy, and the atmosphere in the house this evening had been very lively. He had been trying his hardest to avoid Catherine and focus his attention on the other young ladies who were present at the party, but somehow, it had left him feeling rather hollow inside.

And he still had a sense that the majority of the ladies were rather cautious and suspicious of him, no doubt due to Catherine having warned them about his intentions.

Now, most of the guests had retired to bed, but he was feeling restless. He knew that sleep was not likely to come if he went to bed, so he had decided to come outside for some fresh air and a walk, to see if it would clear his head.

And yet, as he walked around the rose garden, lit only by the light of the moon overhead in the clear sky, he found that his thoughts would not settle. He could not help but wish that things were different.

He had seen the way that Miss Elizabeth Talbot had looked at him. It was barely concealed disdain. She thought he was a fortune hunter, that much was clear to him. And no matter how

pleasant he tried to be and how charming and attentive he was in conversation, he could not break down the barrier that seemed to exist between himself and these young ladies.

He began to realize, as he paced up and down the gravel path, that he was not even sure he wanted to break this barrier down. He was sure that he had nothing to offer any of these young ladies emotionally. A marriage to any one of them would simply be a business deal. So, why was he even wasting his time trying to get to know them properly and form a connection?

He sighed. The situation felt as if it was becoming rather desperate, and in all honesty, he was not sure what action to take next. The house party was progressing, day after day, and he was no closer to securing the investment he needed to pay off the debts that were hanging over his estate and threatening him with bankruptcy.

And all the while, he felt his thoughts returning to Lady Catherine. Was she right that his new title and position in the world did not have to define what he chose for his future?

There was so much that she clearly did not understand, though. He had no doubt, now, that if he was not the Duke of Coltfoot, if he was simply the younger brother of a duke who was at liberty to follow his own heart, his own inclination, that he would be asking her brother for permission to court her with a view to marriage.

But the situation he found himself in was impossible, and he did not want to mislead her any more than he wanted to mislead any of the other young ladies at the house party, regardless of what opposite opinion Catherine might have formed of him.

He heard a rustling behind the bushes ahead and paused for a moment, wondering if he had happened upon a small animal of some kind. He continued walking, albeit a little more cautiously, and when he came to the end of the line of hedgerows, he turned the corner and was surprised to see a figure on the other side standing next to a small ornamental fountain.

The figure was dressed in a long cloak, and Levi gasped as he realized who it might be. He recognized the long, flowing dark-blond hair cascading down the figure's back.

And as his shoes crunched on the gravel of the path, the figure whirled around and let out a gasp.

It was Catherine herself, out here in the garden alone at night. He stood stock still, staring at her.



Catherine heard her own gasp of surprise reverberating through the silence of the night. She had hoped against hope that no one would discover her out here alone. She knew, in her heart, that it was most improper of her to sneak out of the house and into the garden at this late hour. But she could not sleep, and her thoughts would not settle, and she had hoped that the cool night air would help calm her thoughts.

And here was Levi, the last person that she wanted to discover her out here. The last person who would contribute to her finding any peace or calmness on her nighttime jaunt into the gardens.

“Forgive me for startling you, Lady Catherine,” he whispered as he stood a little way away from her.

“It is all right,” she replied. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Nor I,” he said softly. He paused for a moment and stepped a little closer, then seemed to hesitate. “I should leave you alone,” he added. “It would not be right for us to be out here together in the dark.”

Catherine thought for a moment. Even though she had thought that she did not want to see him, now that he was here, she realized that she wanted him to stay, now, more than anything in the world.

“No, Your Grace, you must stay with me. What if I were to get frightened out here on my own? You would not leave me alone, I am sure. You would not abandon me in the dark.”

A look of confusion crossed Levi’s face. Catherine knew that what she had just said was nonsensical. Why would she have come out into the garden alone, if she was scared? She hoped, though, that Levi would humor the lack of logic in her words.

He seemed to hesitate a little before moving closer. “Well, My Lady, if you are sure that you would like me to stay, then, of course, I will do your bidding.”

She smiled into the darkness, feeling a surge of pleasure in her heart that he was out here next to her.

“But I do wonder,” Levi continued, “what you are doing out here late at night on your own if you are frightened to be alone in a dark garden.”

Catherine stifled a giggle. She would not admit to him that she was not frightened. “I could not sleep, as I just said, but when I came out here, I realized that the darkness was more frightening than I had imagined it would be. So, I am glad that you found me, Your Grace.”

“Well, I am glad to be of service, as I said,” Levi replied. “I, too, could not sleep.”

“Is something troubling you, Your Grace?” Catherine asked.

She was not sure whether she was fully prepared for his answer, but she was determined to listen to what he had to say. After all, no one else could hear them. Perhaps this was the perfect opportunity for them to be honest with each other, at long last, in the privacy of the garden.

Levi was not sure how best to answer her question. Should he tell her that he could not stop thinking about her, that his eyes were drawn to her whenever they were in the same room together? He thought, with an inward wry smile, that it was probably best not to admit that to her right now.

But he could not help himself from asking about the other thing that was on his mind. “Have you come to a decision regarding the Earl of Stonewich?” he asked.

As soon as the words had left his lips, he was not sure that he wanted to hear her answer.

Catherine looked at him hesitantly. “The Earl of Stonewich, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Levi said. “He is interested in courting you, I can tell.”

Catherine paused. “I am not so sure about that.”

“Well, I am sure of it,” Levi replied. “Any man could see it. He definitely is interested in you, and I think that your brother would support the match. In fact, he seems to be promoting it.”

Catherine looked at him thoughtfully as if she was trying to decide how much to confide in him. He wondered for a moment if he had gone too far in asking her the question, but the truth was that he really did want to know the answer, for reasons that he did not dare to admit, even to himself. He hoped that, at least, he had been subtle in his questioning so that Catherine would not see how jealous he was to watch her entertaining the attentions of another man.

“I have not decided what to do yet,” Catherine said finally. “You are right that my brother is actively promoting the match.” She paused and looked at him a little coyly. “You know as well as I do that a young lady is not supposed to talk about it when a gentleman pays her attention, but since no one is here to overhear me, I will admit to you that, of course, I have noticed that he seems to be taking special notice of me.”

Levi nodded. “No one could miss it, in all honesty.”

Catherine giggled. “I am not sure that the Earl would like to hear that people think he is being so very obvious in his attentions.”

Levi shrugged. “Sometimes, perhaps, it is better to be direct about these things.”

Catherine looked at him a little oddly and then leaned forward over the edge of the fountain, trailing her hand under the flowing water. “It is hard to know what is right and what is wrong when it comes to these matters,” she pondered. “The Earl seems like a very pleasant gentleman, but...” Her voice trailed off into the darkness, and Levi took another step closer to her so that he was standing next to her by the fountain.

“But?” he probed.

“Oh, I do not know.” Catherine sighed.

Levi looked at her pale face, illuminated by the moonlight, and thought that she looked almost as conflicted as he felt in his own heart.

He decided to venture a little further with his questions, since she did not seem to object to the direction their conversation was taking. “I have heard rumors that you do not have a dowry,” he said slowly. “I think that many gentlemen would find that a rather surprising thing, considering your brother’s position in Society.”

Catherine nodded. "I know that it must seem strange."

"I wonder if you feel that it might be limiting your choice of suitors?"

"I am sure that it is," Catherine replied.

Levi marveled a little at her honesty, and in fact at the honesty that existed between them now, together out here in the dark. They were talking of things that they could not possibly discuss in other settings, such as a ballroom or a drawing room. And there was no dissembling between them now, no pretense. He found it refreshing beyond words, and also a little disarming.

Catherine turned to face him and fixed her eyes on his. "The truth is that my brother would give me a dowry if I wanted one. Quite a large one, I expect. But I told him after my first Season that I did not want one."

"Really?" Levi asked, feeling a little confused. "Why would you decide not to have one when the money was available? Forgive me for asking, Lady Catherine, but it is a rather singular position for a young lady to take."

Catherine nodded. "I can see why people would think that, and of course, the truth is that I know many young ladies would be grateful to have the support that my brother could offer. But the truth of it goes further than that."

Levi waited with bated breath to hear what she said next. She really was a most unique young lady, and he could not tear his

eyes away from her. The moonlight shone on her hair, and her brown eyes were intense as she looked at him.

“During my first Season, it became very clear to me that most of the gentlemen who were paying me attention were mostly interested in my title, as the sister of a duke, and the potential of my dowry and what it could do for them. How it could support their business interests and so on. None of them seemed to be genuinely interested in me. And I do not want to marry someone who is only interested in status and money.”

Levi flinched. Perhaps that is what she thought of him? That he was only interested in a young lady’s status and money?

“And so I told my brother that I did not want a dowry. I want a gentleman to show interest in me because he likes me, or perhaps even more than that...” she trailed off.

Levi knew that she had just been on the verge of talking about love, but she had held back. Perhaps that was too far to go, even in the midst of this candid late-night conversation that they were now having. It would be rather hard to go back once the words had been spoken out loud between them.

“Well, Lady Catherine, I think you are very brave to take such a stand,” he said after a while. “As I said before, I do not think that many young ladies would take such a position.”

Catherine shrugged. “Perhaps I shall end up a spinster as a result of it,” she said with a slight chuckle. “And then I may regret my stubbornness. But for now, I do not want to settle for anything less than a marriage based on affection, at the very least. Money only complicates things.”

Levi thought for a moment about Lord Stonewich and wondered if he, too, knew about the situation with Catherine's dowry.

"I think you are not likely to end up a spinster, Lady Catherine," he said. "I am sure that Lord Stonewich is well aware of the situation. If I have heard the rumors about your dowry, then I am sure he has, too. And he is paying attention to you even though you will not bring money to him if you marry. So, he must be interested in you for your own sake, don't you think?"

Catherine nodded. "I suppose so," she conceded. "I must confess that I have not thought about it enough to know what to do. Perhaps the reality is that I will never find the match I am looking for. Perhaps it does not even exist?"

Levi heard a hint of sadness in her voice, even fear. She may sound as if she was brave, he thought, but he could tell that behind her words, she was worried that she would never find the happiness she was looking for.

He decided that now was the moment to share his struggles with her. She had been honest with him, so it was time for him to respond in kind.

CHAPTER 16



Catherine wondered if she had said too much. Levi had gone rather quiet, and she felt a moment of anxiety, almost embarrassment. Perhaps he thought she was foolish for refusing to have a dowry and at the same time worrying that she would never find the kind of match that she wanted in her heart.

But then, he smiled at her through the darkness, and she felt herself relax. Somehow, she knew she could trust him, and that he would not mock her or think poorly of her for her honesty.

“I think, Lady Catherine, that you and I find ourselves in rather similar situations, in an odd way,” Levi said in a low voice. “I know that you have had your struggles, and I have had mine too. Perhaps it would help you to hear about them?”

Catherine nodded. “I am always ready to listen, Your Grace, to anything you wish to tell me.”

“Thank you,” Levi said, his voice barely above a whisper. “You know that I was not destined to be the Duke. We expected my father to live a little longer than he did, but his death was not a shock. He had been ill for some time. Then, my older brother, Theodore, naturally inherited the estate and

the title, and, of course, I expected him to marry and have a son who would eventually become the Duke after him.”

He paused for a moment, and Catherine could see the sadness on his face.

“When he became ill, at first we thought that he would get better. We sent for the best physicians money could buy, but time after time they told us that his condition was incurable. And I simply would not allow myself to believe them until it became clear, even to me, that his lungs were not going to improve. He was going to die.” His voice choked a little as he said the words.

“He was afraid, I could see it in his eyes. Afraid of the unknown and afraid of leaving behind what he thought had been his destiny for his whole life. We were not as close as some siblings are – I know that you and your brothers and sister are very close – but we got along well, even though Theodore was rather reserved.”

Catherine nodded. “I am very close to my siblings, it is true, but Neil has struggled a lot in the past with getting close to people. You and your brother were not alone in that.”

Levi smiled at that, and Catherine could see something akin to relief in his eyes, perhaps that someone understood what it was he was trying to say. “I still miss him every day, even though there was some distance between us. I did not grieve for my father as perhaps I should have done, though. He never showed me great affection, and we were not close at all. He put all his efforts into preparing Theodore to be the Duke after him. The title was all he cared about, nothing else. And when our mother died, it became even worse. I felt that I never got a look in.”

“That must have been hard for you,” Catherine said. “It was similar for us in some ways, growing up, although our father was not kind to Neil in his efforts to prepare him to be the Duke. But he mostly ignored the rest of us, and although it was a relief not to be subjected to his cruelty, we also felt the lack of love most keenly.”

Levi let out a soft sigh. Catherine felt the warmth of his breath on her face, as they were standing so close together now.

“You see, I was sure that you would understand, Catherine,” he said.

There was silence for a moment between them as they looked into each other’s eyes before Levi spoke again.

“The truth of it is that all I ever wanted was my freedom. I was a typical younger son, carefree and perhaps a little selfish. But I got used to doing as I pleased and living life on my own terms. And then, in the blink of an eye, it was taken from me, and I had to take on this huge responsibility while still grieving for my brother.”

Catherine sighed, seeing the sadness in his eyes again. “I know that things have not been easy for you,” she replied.

“The truth of it is crueler than you could imagine,” he went on. “The estate that I inherited carries a large debt, and I cannot find a way to pay it off. I have tried everything, but the reality is that I have no head for business and no skill for investing. I have tried everything I could possibly think of, and nothing has worked.”

Catherine could see the desperation in his eyes as he told her his tale, and her heart clenched with concern for him.

“And I know you have judged me for it, Catherine, but this is why I must look for a wife with a considerable dowry. It is not what I had hoped for in my former life when I was not a duke. Like you, I wished for a match based on affection, perhaps even love. But the reality now is that I do not have that luxury. I cannot make my own choice, or follow my heart. I must marry a lady who sees the arrangement as a business deal, just as I do. And all I can hope is that the position of being a duchess will be enough for her, since there is precious little else I can offer in terms of love.”

Catherine stared at him. She had always thought that he must have had a good reason for looking for a marriage of convenience, even if she did not know all the details, but now that he had explained it all to her so boldly, she did not know what to think. But as she looked at him, at the sadness and pain in his eyes, her heart almost broke for him. But she was sure, too, that he was wrong in some of what he had said.

“I am sure that what you are saying is not completely true,” she said, moving even closer to him.

His eyes were wide as he looked at her, and she felt something inside her melt at the way he was gazing at her face. She felt, then, that there must be more to him than he was saying.

“I fear not, Catherine,” he whispered.

There was scarcely any space between them now, and Catherine's heart was pounding in her chest. She knew that once she had uttered the words that were on her mind, there would be no going back, no denying anything anymore.

"But, Levi," she said softly, "I do not believe that you do not have any love to give."

She moved even closer to him, and before she could stop herself, she lifted herself on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his.

She felt him gasp as their lips met. The warmth of his mouth came as a surprise to her. She felt a moment of panic, that he would push her away, tell her not to be silly, not to be childish. But after the first moment, when his body was frozen against hers, she felt him beginning to give way.

His lips began to move against hers, softly and tenderly, and he slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

She felt the hardness of his broad chest through his shirt, and something inside her flipped. She had never felt a sensation like this before, in all her life, and she gave way to it completely, in the darkness of the garden.

In the back of her mind, a tiny voice was telling her to stop, that what they were doing was wrong, and that there would be a terrible scandal if anyone saw them, but somehow, she could not tear her lips away from his.

A moment later, though, he pulled away and looked into her eyes with a conflicted look on his face.

He removed his arm from around her waist and stepped back. “Lady Catherine, I am sorry. I should not have allowed that to happen.”

She flushed, her cheeks burning with embarrassment and frustration. “You have nothing to apologize for, Your Grace,” she whispered. “It was – it was my fault.”

“No, it was not your fault,” he insisted. “I should have resisted, and for a moment, I could not, but you and I both know that what we just did was wrong. It should not have happened.”

She stared at him in disbelief. How could he be saying this to her, embarrassing her like this?

“Lady Catherine, I must leave you. You know that we should not be out here alone together. The risk of discovery is considerable.”

He turned and began to walk away from her. Before she could stop herself, she reached out and grabbed his hand, trying to pull him back to her.

“I do not understand why you are apologizing to me,” she said, aware of her voice raising a little. She took a breath and tried to calm herself down. “Why are you walking away from me?” she asked, her voice a little lower.

“Catherine, we must be quiet. If someone finds us out here alone, you know what the consequences would be.”

She flinched at that.

If they were discovered, he would have to marry her, and clearly, that was not a desirable outcome to him. She realized, with a pang, that perhaps it was what she wanted, in her heart, even after everything that had happened between them. And as she looked at him, staring at her in the darkness, she knew that he wanted the same thing, that he was developing feelings for her too.

She took another deep breath and forced herself to say the words in her heart. They had been honest with one another up until now, after all. It made no sense to stop now when such an important thing remained unspoken between them.

“Levi, I know that you are feeling the same way about me as I am about you,” she said, barely able to catch her breath as the words came tumbling out. “I know it. You cannot deny it anymore, surely not, after what has just happened between us.”



Levi’s heart was thumping in his chest as he looked at her pale face staring up at him. He wanted to lean forward and kiss her, press his lips against hers and feel their softness once again. Her kiss had triggered feelings in his mind and body that he had never experienced before, and he wanted to feel them again, so badly.

But somehow, he managed to hold back. He could not allow himself to succumb to these feelings. It was not fair on her to lead her towards a belief that there could ever be anything between them. He swallowed hard, trying to suppress his passion, and forced his breathing to slow down before he spoke the words that he knew he must now say to her.

“Catherine, you must try to understand the position I am in. Even if I wanted to be with you, it could never be. Surely you can see that?”

Catherine shook her head, her long hair falling about her shoulders as she did so. He longed to reach out and sweep it over her shoulder, then take her into his arms again and feel her lips against his.

The confusion and sadness on her face were almost too much to bear. And yet, he forced himself onwards, despite the pain now cutting through his heart.

“You must see, though, Catherine, that the life you want is not something I can offer. I have no freedom, no power to make my own choices. And you want to travel, you want to see the world. I could not tie you into a marriage that would make you unhappy. I could never trap you like that. You deserve to be free, to live your dreams.”

“But what if my dreams are to be with you?” Catherine countered in a voice so small that Levi could only just make out the words.

“Then you must find another dream, Catherine,” he whispered. “You deserve more than a life of duty, a title, all that

responsibility. I could not give you the love that I know you deserve, the love that you have been waiting for all your life.”

She shook her head. “I think you are wrong, Levi,” she said, and now he could hear a note of anger in her voice. “You are pretending to be something that you are not. You are squashing your true self to fit into some mold that you have in your mind of what a duke should be like. And the more you pretend, the more you lie to yourself and everyone around you, the more unhappy you will be.” She paused, and he could hear her breaths coming fast.

“You are wrong about this,” she repeated. “And not only will you make yourself unhappy, but you will make everyone around you unhappy too if you persist like this.”

She stared at him, waiting for him to reply, but he could not find any words to answer her. After a moment, he saw the flash of anger in her eyes before she turned and walked away from him, back towards the house, alone.

He wondered for a moment if he should go after her, but he knew that if they were seen entering the house together at this late hour, then there would be an enormous amount of trouble. He imagined for a moment the look on Michael’s face, or Neil’s, if they were to be discovered. No, he would have to let her go, even though all he wanted was to run after her.

His heart rate slowed as he leaned against the fountain and replayed the conversation they had just had in his head. Was she right? Was he really lying to himself?

He thought that he had cast aside the man that he had once been and laid him to rest along with his brother and his father. But it seemed that that carefree, lively man was the one that Catherine had fallen in love with, and she could not accept that he was gone.

Levi did not know how to convince her of the reality of the situation. He thought he had been clear enough, but she was stubbornly refusing to accept the finality of his words.

And all the time, his own heart rebelled against reality too. He wished that he could court her, propose to her, marry her, and then travel the world with her at his side. In his heart, he knew that what she had said was true. His feelings matched hers entirely. But they could not be together. It was useless to even think of it.

He forced himself to wait a few minutes before going back into the house. He knew that sleep would not come, but he returned to his chamber all the same, knowing that thoughts of Catherine and the softness of her lips would haunt him all through the night.



Catherine threw herself down on her bed and finally allowed the tears to fall. She would never have allowed herself to cry in front of Levi, not after everything that had happened between them. Even though she had confessed her feelings to him, she was still too proud to let him see how devastated she was to hear him telling her that there was no chance that they could be together.

She cursed herself inwardly for her stubborn refusal to accept her brother's offer of a dowry. Maybe she had been foolish all

along. Perhaps if she had a dowry, then Levi would want to marry her.

But even as the thought came into her mind, she pushed it away. That was exactly the reason she had not wanted to have a dowry in the first place. If she had enough money to save his estate, how would she even know that he truly wanted to marry her for *her*? She never would, and she would always wonder if he had simply chosen her for her dowry.

And yet, the sense of frustration raged within her that they were giving up on something that could have been so wonderful. She remembered the glimmers of the old Levi that had shone through as they teased one another at the card table. He had not changed so much as he thought he had, she was sure of it. He was just forcing himself into some idea of what being a duke was all about.

She let out a sigh and buried her head into her pillow, feeling the wetness of her cheeks dampening the pillowcase. She knew that sleep would not come to her tonight and that thoughts of Levi would go round and round in her head for the rest of the night.

And in the morning she would have to face him at the breakfast table, alongside her whole family. She was sure that they would be able to tell that there was something wrong, and Isabel and Ambrose no doubt would have their suspicions. But she could tell no one what had happened between them in the garden this evening. It had to be a secret.

She realized with a churning sensation in her stomach that she would have to face Lord Stonewich too. How on earth was she going to receive his advances when she had confessed her feelings to Levi only hours before?

The whole situation was spiraling out of control, and Catherine, who was usually so poised and confident in dealing with whatever life threw at her, was not sure that she could cope with what the morning would bring.

CHAPTER 17



Catherine was alone in the front parlor. It was the morning of the last day of the house party, and everything had been so busy for the last few days that she was glad to have an opportunity to be by herself for a while before the events of the final day began.

When she had spoken with Constance at breakfast that morning, her sister had told her that the plan was for a final celebration luncheon for the whole party, before people began to take their leave and begin their journeys home.

Catherine reflected on the last couple of days as she looked out the window at the estate grounds bathed in morning sunshine. Since their late-night encounter in the gardens, she and Levi had barely spoken. She had asked Constance not to seat them close together at dinner and had managed to avoid him during the evenings in the drawing room when the guests had played cards or entertained each other with music and singing.

It was not difficult to find other people to talk to, and Catherine thought that the change in their behavior towards one another had mostly gone unnoticed, although Constance had tried to persuade her to explain what was going on. But she had refused to explain. Perhaps everyone would assume

that it was simply because she had chosen to focus her energy on Lord Stonewich instead.

And, indeed, she had spent quite a considerable amount of time with Lord Stonewich over the last few days. His company was pleasant enough, and they had managed to find plenty of things to talk about when they had been seated next to one another at dinner, or when they had been playing cards together. She knew, though, that something was missing. She did not feel a flutter in her stomach when she saw him, and when they danced together, she did not feel any sense of excitement at the touch of his hand on her waist.

She knew that she did not love him, but she could see from the look in his eyes when they were together that he was beginning to feel something for her, or at least he was imagining that he did.

She had wondered if he knew that she did not have a dowry, and she had been meaning to ask Neil about it, but the moment had not arisen.

She had lain awake for most of the previous night, wondering what she should do if he were to propose to her. She could accept and live what would probably be a pleasant and comfortable life as his wife. But she knew that she would never love him. And still, her mind wandered to Levi more often than she cared to admit, even to herself.

But what was the point of thinking of him? He had made his position clear, even after she had kissed him. The shame of it was almost too much to bear, that she had made her feelings so clear and he had pushed her away. And now, as the house party drew to a close, she sensed that things were about to reach a conclusion.

So, when Lydia came into the parlor and told her that Neil was in the library and wanted to see her, she had a feeling that she knew what was coming.

“Catherine, you look very pale,” Lydia observed as they walked down the corridor together. “Are you quite all right?”

Catherine smiled weakly. “I feel a little tired after the events of the week, but I am quite all right, I promise.”

Lydia smiled and patted her on the arm. “Good luck,” she whispered before Catherine pushed open the door to the library and went inside.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. She hoped that if the subject for discussion was what she thought it was going to be, Neil would be alone and not expect her to discuss it in front of Lord Stonewich himself.

When she entered the library, she was relieved to find her brother alone, sitting in a leather chair next to the fireplace.

“Catherine, thank you for coming to see me,” Neil said.

She gave a nervous giggle. “Must we be so formal, Neil?”

“Well, it is a rather serious matter that we need to discuss, and I am sure you can guess what it is,” he said. “Please, do sit down.” He motioned towards the chair opposite his own.

She sat down a little awkwardly. She wished that things did not feel so stiff between them. She longed for the fun and laughter that they shared together as a family, rather than this serious atmosphere that made her feel so anxious.

“So, Catherine, I am sure you will not be surprised to know that Lord Stonewich has asked for my permission to propose to you. Now...” He paused for a moment and looked at her closely. “If I thought that this was a great romance, I would not have said anything to you, and I would have allowed the man to ask you to marry him, in whatever way he saw fit, so that you could enjoy the occasion. But the truth of the matter is that I think that is not what you would want to happen. Am I right?”

Catherine’s heart sank at her brother’s business-like tone. She was not sure how to answer him, so she focused only on his last question. He was quite right, of course, that she would not want to receive a romantic proposal from Lord Stonewich. It would make the whole situation seem ridiculous.

“You are right about that, Brother,” she admitted, deciding to say no more for the moment.

“But he is very keen to settle things, Catherine. Tell me, what do you think about his offer?”

Catherine closed her eyes for a moment, trying to think of what to say. But all she could see in her imagination was Levi’s face. She sighed. He was the last thing she should be thinking of right now.

“Neil, can I ask you whether Lord Stonewich knows that I do not have a dowry?”

Neil nodded. “Of course, you can ask, Catherine. And the truth is that yes, he does know, and he wants to marry you anyway.”

“Why would he want to marry me without a dowry?” Catherine asked, a little incredulous. “I do not believe that he is desperately in love with me.”

Neil chuckled. “I do not think he would admit to being desperately in love with you, no. But he does seem to like you very much. He talked rather eloquently about all your qualities.” He paused and looked at her closely. “I know this might not be quite what you had in mind for your marriage, Catherine, but he is a good man, and I think he would try very hard to make you happy.”

“But I do not love him, Neil,” she said softly.

Neil nodded. “I know that. I can tell from the way you are with him that you find him perfectly pleasant, but that there is nothing more than that present for you at the moment. But do you think that it could grow between you? These things happen sometimes, you know.”

Catherine shrugged. “I know that it is possible for love to grow, but you are right. I had hoped for more than this in a marriage.”

“Is there another gentleman that you prefer?” Neil asked carefully.

Catherine turned away, unable to meet her brother's eyes. After all that had happened between herself and Levi, it was clear that her brother still suspected that there was something going on. But she could not even talk about him. It was too painful. She knew that there was no hope.

"There is no one else that I hope to marry," she said softly. She knew that it was not the whole truth, but it was all that she could say. Levi had made his position clear: he was not prepared to marry her. "But that does not mean that I am resolved to accept Lord Stonewich's proposal," she added as firmly as she could manage.

"So, you have not decided?" Neil asked.

"I have not decided," she replied. "I would like a little time to think, Brother, if I may?"

He nodded. "I think, though, that it would be a kindness to Lord Stonewich not to make him wait for too long. Do you think that perhaps you might have reached your decision by the time we have finished our final meal together today? I think it would be good to tell him before he leaves the estate at the end of the house party."

Catherine nodded. "I have no wish to torture the poor man," she said with a weak smile. "I need some time to make my decision, but I promise you that I will have an answer by this evening."

"Very well, Catherine." Neil smiled at her kindly. "I hope that you will consider all angles of this situation. I know it is a

difficult decision to make, but I trust that you will make the right choice.”

She nodded. “I know it is a serious matter, Neil. I will do my best to make the right decision.”

“You know full well, Catherine, that I never thought that I would find the kind of love that I have found with Lydia. My heart was closed to it. But eventually, I realized that sometimes fate has another way.”

“But I do not see how there can be another way, Neil.” Catherine sighed. “Everything seems so hopeless to me sometimes.”

Neil looked at her curiously. “I wonder if there is someone else that you are interested in?”

Catherine flushed. Her mind was racing, but she knew that she could not admit to her brother that she had such strong feelings for Levi. What would be the point? There was no way that they could be together.

She shook her head. “No, there is no one, Neil.”

He shrugged. “I am not sure I believe you, Catherine,” he replied. “I would simply urge you not to give up hope too soon, that is all. If I had given up hope, then I would never have found happiness with Lydia. And all I wish for you is that you can find the same joy in your own life.”

Catherine looked at her brother and thought how much he had changed from the cold young man who had become a duke at a rather younger age than he would have wished. She knew that he had her best interests at heart, and she was grateful for it.

“Thank you, Brother, for your advice, and for always wanting what is best for me.”

She reached out to embrace him, then left the room, her mind awash with thoughts and her heart fraught with feelings that she could scarcely put a name to. She did not know which way to turn when she emerged into the corridor. Should she go to her chamber, to be alone, or should she seek out someone to talk to – Lydia, maybe, or Constance, or perhaps Isabel?

She knew what they would all say, though. That only she could make this decision.

She decided that the best solution was to go outside for a walk around the estate to try and clear her head. There was no use in talking it through with anyone. She had to examine her own heart, and her own mind, and try to make a decision that would be the best thing for her future happiness.

She ran upstairs to her chamber to change into her outdoor clothes, then back downstairs and out through a side door into the gardens.

She walked and walked, and without even thinking about it, she found herself standing next to the fountain where she had stood with Levi only a few nights ago, in the darkness. Where she had reached up on her tiptoes and kissed him, and felt his

resistance turn to acceptance, and his acceptance turn to yearning.

She had tried not to allow herself to dwell too much on that moment when their lips had met, but her efforts had often been futile. Thoughts of it came to her in the middle of the night, or when she was alone in her chamber preparing for the day, or even when she was in the middle of doing something else – a conversation with a guest, or a game of cards, or even in the middle of dancing with another gentleman.

It seemed that thoughts of Levi would never leave her alone. And yet, she knew that it was futile to think of him.

If he had changed his mind about what he had said that night, he would have spoken to her over these last few days. But he had said nothing. He had barely come anywhere near her. His decision had been made. And even though Catherine knew in her heart that he loved her, just as she loved him, there was nothing she could do to change his mind.

But did that mean that she should accept Lord Stonewich?

She sighed and looked around the walled garden and the fountain that she had been drawn to. She felt claustrophobic, all of a sudden. She did not want to be in this enclosed space. She wanted to be on the back of her horse, galloping across the fields, or walking beside a lake, or through a forest. Anywhere where there were no boundaries, no restrictions.

But she knew that she could not leave the estate now. It would be time for the final meal of the house party soon, and she knew that she had to be present. Her sister would be most

upset if she vanished off to rampage around the countryside on her horse.

So, she was stuck here with her thoughts, unable to reach a decision.

She put her hand under the fountain and felt the chill of the cool water on her skin. She heard a rustling in the bushes on the other side of the walled garden, and when she looked up, she saw Levi standing there, staring at her.

She was about to speak, to call his name, to ask him what he was doing there, but he shook his head. It was a tiny movement, almost imperceptible. But she saw it all the same.

He bowed to her, then turned and walked away.

Her heart was in her throat as she fought against the urge to run after him. Why had he come to this garden? Was it because he, too, was tortured by memories of what had happened between them here? Or was it simply a coincidence? Perhaps he was out for a walk and took a wrong turn, and there was nothing more to it than that?

Catherine let out a groan of anguish. How could she make a clear-headed decision about Lord Stonewich when her mind was still full of Levi?

The situation seemed hopeless, and she was rapidly running out of time.

CHAPTER 18



“Levi, I must say that I had hoped to find you in rather better shape,” Michael said, looking at his friend as they sat opposite one another in the library of Levi’s house.

Levi smiled a little wryly. “I am sorry to disappoint you, Michael.”

“You look exhausted. Have you not been sleeping well?”

Levi shook his head. “I confess that I have not slept well for some time now.”

He chose not to tell Michael that he had not slept at all the previous night. He had tossed and turned in bed, haunted by memories of the past and worries for the future. He was not sure how long he could go on like this.

“You cannot go on like this,” Michael said firmly. “I am worried about you. Even at the house party, you seemed distracted. I invited you there so that you could enjoy yourself and meet some charming ladies, but by the end of the week, you seemed almost more unhappy than you were at the

beginning. Constance was most distressed that we had not achieved our aim of cheering you up. So, we decided that I had to come and see you – I do not like the thought of you rattling around in this enormous house by yourself.”

Levi shrugged. “There is nothing you can do. The house party was very pleasant, and I am grateful that you invited me, but the situation is unchanged. And the fact remains that I am the only person who can do anything about it.”

“I think we should have a drink, Levi, and then you can tell me everything.”

“We can certainly have a drink,” Levi agreed. “But there is not much to tell. Nothing has changed since we were together at the house party. Since before then, in fact.”

Michael ignored him and got to his feet, crossed the room, and poured them both a glass of brandy from the decanter on the sideboard.

Levi watched as his friend returned to where they were sitting and handed him his drink. He did not know what Michael was expecting him to say. His estate was still in debt, he had not found a wife, and there was a gnawing pain in his heart that would not leave him.

“I must say, Levi, that I am rather baffled by what you are doing,” Michael admitted, taking a sip of his drink.

“What do you mean?” Levi asked.

His friend's questions were beginning to make him feel a little irritated, but he tried to remain calm. He drank from his glass, the liquid burning a little as it trickled down his throat. He remembered that he didn't really like brandy. The decanter was ever-present in the library, as it had been since his father's time, and he had never thought about it up until this moment. He wondered if Theodore had enjoyed it more than he did. Perhaps Theodore's tastes were more suited to being a duke than his was.

Suddenly, he had a strange urge to get up, throw open the window, and pour the brandy out onto the flowerbed below. He would never fit in here, in this new role that had been thrust upon him.

"I mean, Levi, that you are sitting around, being miserable all day. You are clearly not sleeping, and not looking after yourself, despite the army of servants that are here to take care of you. And somehow, you are managing to shut out all your friends and everyone who cares about you by insisting that you must manage your troubles by yourself."

Levi set his glass down on the table next to him. "I don't know what any of you think you can do to help, though. That is the whole point."

He stared morosely at his friend. He did not even know why Michael had bothered to come and see him if all he was going to do was interrogate him and make banal comments.

Michael sighed. "You are quite unrecognizable from the friend I used to know, Levi. You really are not who you used to be anymore."

Levi could keep his composure no longer. "I am not the same man that I was! That is what I keep trying to tell you!" His voice was raised now, and he could feel a slight tremble in his hand as he reached for his drink again and took a gulp. "I am solely responsible for this estate, and all the wretched debt that it has been saddled with. My father is gone, Theodore too, and there is no one who can help me. I am on the verge of bankruptcy, Michael. I could lose anything, any moment now."

Michael looked at him, concern on his face. "I did not realize it was quite that bad, my friend."

Levi nodded. "It *is* that bad. And the truth of the matter is that the carefree man I once was has vanished, Michael. He is gone, and he will never return. I can no longer be myself anymore. I must try to be like Theodore. I must try to be the kind of duke that he would have been, in his honor, since he is not here to do the job himself. And, of course, he would have done a much better job of it than me."

"Nonsense!" Michael insisted. "It is not your fault that your father left the estate in debt any more than it was Theodore's. And I am sure that he would have struggled to get on top of things, too, just as you have. But you do not have to face this alone. Your friends are worried about you, Levi."

Levi let out a ragged sigh. "Do you want to know the worst of it?" he said, smiling that wry smile again as he looked at Michael. "The worst thing of all is that what would help me most would be to find love. Then I would not feel so alone in all this if I had the woman I loved by my side. But I cannot even do that. I am so depleted by the pressures of being a duke that I simply have nothing to give to a young lady. There is no hope that I could offer any woman what she deserves as a husband."

He paused and drank again. “And then, when I tried to view marriage as a business transaction and to find a lady whose fortune could help me get out of this mess, I failed at that too.”

He did not blame Catherine for her part in that. He thought, in hindsight, that perhaps she was right. He should have been more upfront about his motives. He had never intended to mislead anyone, but it seemed that, inadvertently, that was exactly what he had done.

“Levi, I keep telling you, you are wrong to give up on finding a love match,” Michael said. “I never thought I would find a woman who I could love, truly love, but I found Constance, and honestly it was the most peculiar set of circumstances that brought us together. If it can happen to me, then it can happen to anyone.”

Levi shook his head. “You do not understand, Michael. I am not worthy of it. I am not worthy of a young lady’s heart. And that is the end of it.”

Michael was quiet for a while, a thoughtful look on his face.

Levi felt that sense of hollowness creeping up on him again. He had poured out his heart to his friend, and in fact, Michael was the only person in the world that he could imagine himself being so honest with. Apart from Catherine, of course – he felt sure that he would tell her anything, now, if she asked him. But it was too late for that.

He remembered the look on her face when their eyes had met across the garden on the last day of the house party. He had

wanted to run to her, then, and tell her that he loved her, that he wanted to be with her. But he knew that it could not be. Nothing had changed since they had met that night in the garden. He could not give her the life she deserved. And so, even though his heart was breaking, he had walked away from her.

And now, Michael looked at him curiously. “If you will forgive me for being blunt, Levi, it sounds as if there is a particular young lady on your mind when you say these things.”

Levi grunted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied.

He did not think he could bear to talk about Catherine, even in front of Michael. It was just too painful and brought back too many bittersweet memories of the time he had spent with her.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Levi,” Michael said firmly. “I’m not going to let this one go. We need to talk about you and Lady Catherine Windham.”

Levi shook his head. “I do not want to talk about her. Please, Michael.”

He felt a lump forming in his throat. He did not think that he could even say her name out loud.

Michael sighed. “I know that you are in love with her. It is plain as day for anyone who sees you together. There can be no doubt about it at all. In fact, I think that the only time I have

seen you smile – and I mean properly smile – since your father died has been when you have been standing by her side.”

“I cannot give her what she wants, Michael,” Levi mumbled sadly.

“So, you admit that you are in love with her?”

There was a note of triumph in Michael’s voice that made Levi bristle.

“What would be the point of admitting it when it is quite obvious that we can never be together?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh, Michael, I wish you would stop asking such stupid questions!” Levi gritted out, feeling his temper beginning to flare again. “I do not want to talk about her. It is a hopeless situation, and talking about it does not change anything. It only reminds me of something I would rather forget.”

Michael leaned forward in his chair. “Levi, don’t get angry with me. I am only trying to help, and I can see that you are distressed. The fact is that I can see that you are in love with Catherine. I thought when you first met at our wedding that there was something there, and when I saw you together at the house party, I could see that the attraction was still there, and growing with every minute that you spent together.”

“But, Michael, don’t you see that it is futile to talk of it at all? I cannot be with her. She wants love and adventure, and I am a duke hanging on by a thread. My estate is in danger of bankruptcy. I have nothing to offer her. She deserves much better than me.”

Michael sighed. “I cannot bear to see you like this, Levi. What will it take to convince you that all is not lost?”

Levi shook his head. “I do not know. I feel as if I have lost all hope. I am trying to follow in my father and my brother’s footsteps, but I know that I am not strong enough, not wise enough, to be as good a duke as Theodore was. And any hopes I had of love are long gone. That carefree man who met Lady Catherine at your wedding is long gone. Surely you must see that, Michael?”

“But, Levi, I am no fool,” Michael declared. “A good friend can tell when a man is in love. Remember when I was falling in love with Constance? You knew it right from the start, almost before I did. And now, I can see it in your eyes. I have no doubt that you are in love with her. The question, however, remains. What are you going to do about it?”

CHAPTER 19



Levi got to his feet. He could not bear to be sitting still anymore. He felt restless, as if he wanted to run from the room, run from the house, out into the outside world, to escape, somehow, from the reality of his life.

He paced up and down the room, a sense of anguish threatening to engulf him.

“Michael, I have tried to explain this to you countless times before, but you are not understanding me,” he said, trying to keep the impatience from his voice. “I have lost my father and my brother. I was thrust into the role of a duke when it was the last thing in the world that I wanted to happen. I did not want to have to spend my life managing a large estate, and taking on all the worries and troubles that come with that responsibility. But here I am, and this is my life now.”

“I do understand how painful it is to lose members of your family,” Michael replied. “Believe me, I do. But you can make a choice, Levi, to live in the past, or to try and move forward, to try and heal.”

“I am not sure that I know how to,” Levi admitted. He sat back down on his chair, leaned over, and dropped his face in his

hands. "I do not know what to do, Michael. That is the truth of it."

"Shall I give you my honest opinion?" Michael offered gently.

Levi nodded. "I know I have been unbearable today, Michael, but I am grateful that you have come to see me, and that you are trying to help, despite how it might seem with my behavior."

Michael smiled. "I know that you are troubled, my friend. All things can be forgiven, in the circumstances."

"So, tell me your wisdom," Levi said. "I promise I will listen, even if I cannot promise to follow your advice."

"Very well." Michael got up and poured them another glass of brandy each, then returned to his seat. "I think that if you had a woman whom you loved, and who loved you, by your side, then facing all the pressures of your new title would feel a lot easier. The problem that you have now is that you have convinced yourself that you have to endure it all on your own."

Levi nodded. "I do agree with you on that, but it seems impossible."

"Not at all," Michael replied. "The truth of it is simple. You have already found love. You are just trying to run away from it because it frightens you."

Levi thought for a moment about some of his interactions with Catherine. He had run away from her when she had kissed him, and he had run away from her in the garden on the last day of the house party. He had been afraid to admit his feelings because they did not fit in with the idea of his future that he had crafted in his feverish mind. And yet, when he thought about his future, he knew that he wanted her by his side.

“But what if it’s too late?” he whispered.

Michael sighed. “Well, if you are finally talking about Catherine, and acknowledging that you love her, and that you should do something about it, then I am overjoyed. If you let her go, I am sure that you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

“I think you are right, Michael,” Levi said. “But I have treated her so badly. I was so rude to her all those weeks ago at the ball, and you know that we have not always got along well since. I do not think that I should assume anything about her feelings for me.”

“But how will you know if you do not ask?” Michael challenged. “The reality is that you need to take action, rather than sitting around and feeling sorry for yourself.”

Levi sighed. “But what about the debt? Even if I asked Catherine to marry me, and she accepted, then I would still have no solution to my financial problems.”

Michael cocked his head to the side. “Let me put it to you another way. What if I said to you that by walking away from

her, you are denying her a choice?”

Levi shook his head. “I do not understand what you mean.”

“What I mean,” Michael said slowly, “is that you are choosing her life for her. She might prefer to live by your side, even if things are difficult, but you are denying her that choice. And the fact is, if you were to marry, then I suspect that things would work themselves out, in those circumstances.”

“What do you mean?”

Michael shook his head. “Never mind that. The main question is, what would you prefer? You can live here alone, worrying yourself into an early grave as you try and solve all the problems of your estate on your own. Or you can keep trying to find a rich woman to marry, whom you will not love, and who will not love you, and you will probably still be miserable. Or you can take action and follow your heart.” He paused. “You know, my own experience tells me that it pays to be courageous in matters of the heart. Then you might be surprised how everything else falls into place.”

“I know that you are right, Michael,” Levi said, sitting up a little straighter. “But I am still worried that it is too late. I do not think I should make any assumptions about Lady Catherine’s feelings for me.”

Michael nodded. “There is something else, too, that I must tell you before I leave.”

Levi looked up at him questioningly. “Tell me!”

“Lord Stonewich proposed to Catherine at the end of the house party. Well, he asked Neil for his permission to ask for her hand. I am not sure if he spoke to her directly himself.”

Levi felt a surge of panic coursing through his body. “And did she accept?”

“I am afraid I do not know the answer to that,” Michael replied. “Neil wanted her to decide before everyone departed from the house party. At the point that we left, I believe that she still had not given her answer.”

Levi breathed a sigh of relief. “Then she meant to refuse him!” he said triumphantly. “I am sure that if she meant to accept, she would have done so immediately.”

Michael shook his head. “I am not so sure about that. I think the fact that she was thinking about it for so long means that she was considering the proposal seriously. There is no way I can tell you what she said. She has not been in touch with Constance about it, so we are as much in the dark as you are.”

Levi frowned. “I must take action, then,” he said quietly.

“Yes, my friend, I think that you must. If she feels that there is no hope for you to be together, she might feel forced into accepting Lord Stonewich’s proposal. And I know that if she were to marry him, you would regret your hesitancy for the rest of your days.”

“Yes, that is true.” Levi got to his feet and reached out to shake Michael’s hand. “Thank you for coming to see me. I have some thinking to do.”

Michael chuckled. “Do not think for too long, Levi.” He drained his brandy glass and headed for the door. “Trust me when I tell you this. You must act, or forever regret it.”

Levi watched his friend leave the room, then resumed his pacing up and down the library. He was sorely tempted to pour himself another brandy, even though he did not really like the taste. But he resisted. He knew that he needed a clear head to make this decision.

He thought back to the last couple of days of the house party. He had made every effort to avoid Catherine, after their liaison in the garden. He had scarcely trusted himself to be close to her, his desire to kiss her again had been so strong, But he had forced himself to stay away, convincing himself that all the reasons he had given her as to why they could not be together were valid.

But he had watched her closely throughout every gathering. He had seen Lord Stonewich continue to pay court to her, and he had watched her response. She had laughed and smiled at all the right times, agreed to play cards with him, and even agreed to dance with him one evening when the guests had pushed the furniture back in the drawing room and danced to country dances played by Constance on the pianoforte. But he could tell from watching her that her heart had not really been in it. That sparkle that he had seen in her eyes had been missing.

And sometimes, when she had been alone for a moment, in the corner of a room, watching things going on around her and

thinking that no one had been looking, he had seen a hint of sadness creeping across her face.

He was convinced that she did not love Lord Stonewich and that she did not want to marry him. But he knew that she was afraid of being alone, afraid of not having a family of her own. And she had seen her brother and sister form love matches. It must have been painful for her to struggle with the decision as to whether she should accept a marriage that was not truly based on affection, but that to all outward appearances was a good and sensible match.

He could not bear it, though, the thought of someone like Catherine being forced into a union like that out of fear and loneliness. His heart ached to see her now, to tell her that he loved her and that he could offer her better.

But could he? Could he, really? The question echoed around in his mind until he thought he would run mad.

At last, though, he came to a decision. He checked the clock on the mantelpiece. What he was about to do would no doubt seem insane to many other people, but he knew that it was the only way.

He rushed up to his chamber to prepare himself, barking orders to his manservant as he went. There was no time to lose and everything to gain.



It was late that evening when Michael returned home to the Vaughan estate. The journey to and from Levi's estate at

Coltfield was not inconsiderable, and Michael was glad he had taken the carriage, rather than attempting it on horseback.

When he entered the parlor, he was surprised to see that Constance was there, sitting on the sofa with her sewing.

“Constance, you should not have waited up for me!” he chided her. “It is far too late. I do not want you to be overtired tomorrow.”

“I knew that I would not be able to sleep until I knew you were safely returned home,” she replied, smiling up at him. “Let me pour you some tea. You have had a long journey.”

She got up and went to the tea tray on the sideboard, and poured him some tea. He took it gratefully, warming his hands on the steaming cup.

“It has been a rather arduous day,” he agreed. “But I am glad that I went.”

“And did you manage to talk some sense into him?” Constance asked. She sat down again on the sofa, picked up her cup, and took a sip of her own tea.

“He really was in a funk when I arrived,” Michael said. “He has utterly convinced himself that he has to manage all his troubles alone. It took me a while to convince him that he was talking nonsense.”

Constance smiled. "I knew that you would talk him around. But remember, it is not completely unheard of for men who are otherwise very sensible to have rather strange ideas when it comes to love."

Michael grinned. "My dear, I know that you are right, and I know that when we met I was one of those men who had strange ideas, but how lucky I was that you were there to set me straight, and to change my mind."

"And do you think that Catherine has changed his mind?" Constance asked.

Michael nodded. "I think that he is deeply in love with her, and only just allowing himself to admit it. He has been running away from love for a long time and seems to have been afraid of a true connection. But I think that I managed to persuade him that if he did not act, he would always regret it."

Constance nodded. "I only hope that her feelings are what he hopes they are. It was most strange, those last few days of the house party, that she did not speak to anyone about what was going on in her mind and her heart. She did not confide in me, and I asked Lydia and Isabel too, and they said the same. She kept her distance from everyone."

"Except Lord Stonewich," Michael reminded her. "She seemed to have spent most of her time with him."

"I cannot help but blame Neil for this," Constance said, a little irritably. "If he had not put Lord Stonewich in her way and encouraged him to position himself as a suitor for her, then she would not have gotten herself confused."

Michael shrugged. "If it had not been Lord Stonewich, it would have been another man. Neil sees it as his job to make sure you are all well-settled. How was he to know that Catherine was not going to fall madly in love with Lord Stonewich? Perhaps he thought that he was setting up a potential love match, rather than a marriage of convenience."

Constance nodded. "Perhaps you are right. I know that our brother would never try to persuade Catherine to marry against her will. He has always known that she and I were determined to find love matches."

Michael leaned over and kissed her softly on the cheek. "And you, at least, have found one. Let us hope that Catherine does, too."

"But what if she has already accepted Lord Stonewich?" Constance asked, a wave of panic surging through her. "If she is already engaged to him, she will have to go through with it. A broken engagement would cause a huge scandal."

Michael nodded. "I know, and that is why I told Levi to hurry. It may well be that she still has not yet made up her mind, and he will not be too late."

Constance sighed. "I hope he is not too late. I cannot bear the thought of Catherine being trapped in a marriage that is not truly what her heart desires."

"And I hope, for Levi's sake too, that he makes it there in time. Otherwise, his heart will be broken and, honestly, I fear

for him. He is not coping well with the pressure of his new title, and I think that this could prove too much for him.”

Constance frowned. “I suppose there is no point in us worrying about it anymore,” she murmured.

“I have done my best.” Michael sighed. “I knew that I had to go and see him, and talk to him, after seeing the sorry state he was in when he left the house party. I have done that, and I think I have helped him see sense. All we can do now is wait and see what happens.”

“I do wish Catherine had sent a note to let me know what she has decided about Lord Stonewich,” Constance said, wringing her hands in her lap.

“Well, I suppose the best we can hope for is that she has not yet decided, or that she has turned him down but chosen not to tell anyone,” Michael mused. “Although I must say that it is unusual for Catherine to play her cards quite so close to her chest.”

“Speaking of cards,” Constance said, looking up at him with a slight smile on her face, “would you like to have a quick game with your wife before we go to bed? I feel that I am too stirred up inside with worry about Catherine to go to sleep just yet.”

Michael nodded. “I would like that very much.” He got to his feet. “I will leave you to set up the game, my dear. You can choose. It does not matter what we play, really, as I know that you will beat me. I will just go upstairs and see the children. I am sure they will be fast asleep by now, but I like to check on them, you know, before I retire for the night.”

Constance nodded. It always made her heart swell with love to see her husband poking his head into the nursery late at night to check on their children. Sometimes he crept in to kiss each of them and to inhale their sweet, sleepy smell. She wondered if he knew how much she loved him.

“Yes, my love, you go and see them. I will get the game ready.”

Michael left the parlor and climbed the stairs to the nursery, then crept in through the door to see his son and daughter tucked snugly into their cots. He bent down and kissed them both, then withdrew.

He felt a surge of gratitude in his heart. He knew that he was a lucky man. And all he could do now was pray that Levi made it to Catherine in time before she gave in and promised herself to a man that she did not love.

He prayed that it was not too late and that Levi could find happiness in marriage the way that he and Constance had. Because he knew that there was no greater joy on earth, and he earnestly wanted his friend to experience it too.

CHAPTER 20



“Catherine, I hope that you are not too disappointed that we are leaving you?” Isabel asked as they stood together in the hallway.

Catherine shook her head. “Not at all. Of course, I shall miss you, but I quite understand the reason you feel unable to stay any longer.”

Isabel sighed. “I just miss little Georgie so much. It has been too long to be away from him, really.”

Ambrose nodded. “I had thought that a few weeks away would be manageable, but I, too, feel the loss of our son most keenly. He is at that age, you know, where he is learning new things every day, and although I am sure he is being perfectly well looked after by his nanny, I am afraid that we are missing him so much!”

Catherine smiled. “I do understand, really,” she reassured.

She had seen enough of her nieces and nephews to know that they really did change on an almost daily basis, and she thought that if she was in Isabel and Ambrose’s position, with

a tiny child at home, then she would not want to be apart from them for long either.

“Are you sure that you are going to be all right?” Isabel asked, looking at Catherine with concern in her eyes. “I know that Neil is going away in a few days, and Constance and Michael are at their estate. You will be here alone...”

Catherine shrugged. “I am not alone. I have an army of servants to look after me. I will be perfectly all right.”

“But you seem rather out of sorts since the house party ended,” Isabel pushed.

Catherine sighed. “We have been over this already, Isabel. I am perfectly fine. Please, there is no need to worry about me.”

“Well, I am going to say one last thing before we leave, Catherine, and I hope that you will listen to me.”

Catherine nodded. She suspected that she knew what her friend was going to say to her, but she resolved to listen anyway and try to consider whatever advice was to come with an open mind.

“I think that you rejected Lord Stonewich’s proposal a little hastily,” Isabel said, a note of caution in her voice. “You did seem to get along well together. I am sure that I saw him make you laugh more than once, and I know how important you consider a sense of humor to be.”

“He is a pleasant gentleman,” Catherine relented. “I have never said otherwise.”

Isabel nodded. “I know that. And honestly, I do not think it is too late. I do not think that he has any other young lady in mind to be his wife. If you write to him and tell him that you have changed your mind, I am sure that your wedding could take place soon...”

“I do not want to marry him, though,” Catherine said. Her voice was soft, but her tone was firm. “I thought about it long and hard, just like Neil asked me to. I considered it from every angle, and I made the decision after careful deliberation.”

“But, Catherine, what if no one else ever asks you?” Isabel asked, wide-eyed. “I know that it is not something that you want to think about, but you must admit that it is a real possibility.”

Catherine bit her lip and swallowed before responding. She knew that her friend meant well, but to hear her say those words out loud was rather painful.

“I have resolved that I would rather be a spinster than marry without love,” Catherine said, eventually. “That is what I have always believed since my first Season, when it was so clear to me that most of the gentlemen I met were only interested in me for the money and status that I could confer on them. If the only option available to me is to marry someone I do not love with all my heart, then I would rather not marry at all.”

“But, Catherine,” Isabel said, “I want you to be happy, that is all.”

Catherine nodded. "And I would not have been happy with Lord Stonewich, which is why I turned him down."

"Do you really think that you could not have been happy with him?" Isabel asked.

Catherine glanced between her friend and her husband and could not help but feel a pang of envy.

Isabel had not had to compromise, and nor had Neil, or Constance. It seemed so unfair that they were all expecting her to agree to the kind of marriage that none of them had had to accept. And the truth of it was that she knew that there was someone she could have been happy with, but she had been forced to give up all hope on that score. And yet, even though she knew she would not be able to marry Levi, it did not follow in her mind that she should still settle for a marriage based on anything other than love.

"I know myself, Isabel," Catherine insisted. "I know myself well enough to know that if I broke the promise I made to myself several years ago, that I would not marry without true affection, I would always be disappointed in myself."

She paused. "I know I am lucky. I know that many young ladies do not have the luxuries that I do." She glanced around the grand entrance hall and gave a wry smile. "I can live in comfort and ease here with my brother for as long as I want. I do not need to marry to secure my future. And therefore, I will not settle for anything less than a love match."

Isabel sighed. “I am just so sad for you, Catherine,” she whispered. “I had hoped so much that, during the course of the house party, you would find true love.”

Catherine nodded. “I must confess that I had high hopes, too. But it is not the end of the world.” She took a deep breath, forcing herself to try and see things in a positive light. “There will be another Season next year, and the year after that. Perhaps it is not too late, after all!”

Ambrose smiled at her, then stepped forward to embrace her. “I am sure that it is not too late for you, Catherine.”

The butler appeared to tell them that Ambrose and Isabel’s carriage was nearly ready, so they made their way out onto the front steps of the house.

“I am sure that Neil will be down soon to say goodbye to you,” Catherine said.

She suspected that her brother had been caught up on some pressing business matter and was hiding away in his library until the last moment. Even though he was much less shy and awkward than he had been before he had met Lydia, she knew that he still found goodbyes rather awkward.

“Are you utterly convinced, Catherine, that you have done the right thing?” Isabel prodded. “I know that you are probably fed up with talking about it, but I do not want you to look back on this decision and regret it.”

Catherine shook her head. “I will not regret declining his proposal, I promise you. Lord Stonewich is a very nice man, but he is not the right man for me. I am sure he will find happiness with some other young lady in due course. And I will wait for a love match, or I will remain unmarried. It is not such a terrible thing to be a spinster, after all. I find that I am rather getting used to the idea.”

She smiled and tried to look jovial, but in her heart, she knew that she was not at all resolved to the possibility that she would never find love. Especially when she knew that, in fact, she *had* found love. It had been right there, in front of her, but then had disappeared before her very eyes, the moment he had walked away from her.

Isabel sighed. “I hope that you have made the right choice, that is all I can say.” She stared at her friend intently. “I think that perhaps there is something that you are not telling us, but I will interrogate you no further. We must be on our way.”

Ambrose nodded. “It is a long way home, and I was hoping that we might make it before Georgie goes to bed.”

Isabel and Ambrose exchanged smiles, and Catherine felt that pang of envy once again for the comfortable domestic life that they shared. Perhaps it would never be hers, after all. Was her friend right, that she might regret turning down Lord Stonewich? She did not think so. It was far more likely that she would spend the rest of her days wondering if she could have done more to convince Levi that they should be together.

Now, though, she had a few days alone to gather her thoughts. The peace would be welcome, she thought, after the hubbub and busyness of the last few weeks. Once Isabel and Ambrose

had departed, and Neil had left for his business trip, she would be quite alone.

The carriage drew up in front of the steps, with the luggage already loaded onto the back.

“I cannot help but feel worried about leaving you, Catherine,” Isabel said, reaching out and hugging her friend.

Catherine smiled. “I promise you, I am perfectly fine. Please, try not to worry about me.”

She knew in her heart that, in reality, she was not fine, and perhaps never would be again, but what was the point of telling Isabel that? She had her own family to worry about. It was better just to let them go, and then deal with her feelings afterward.

Ambrose and Isabel were just about to climb up into their carriage when there was a sudden sound of clattering hooves approaching.

Catherine looked up in confusion. Could it be Neil coming home? She was sure, though, that he had not actually left the house this morning and that he was still inside, in the library.

She could not think who else it could be. The rider was approaching the house very fast, indeed, and she felt a surge of alarm. Perhaps it was a messenger bringing bad news from Constance and Michael? Perhaps the baby had taken a turn for the worse again?

“Who on earth could this be, riding like the devil?” Ambrose muttered. “Are you expecting anyone, Catherine?”

“No, indeed,” Catherine replied. Her heart in her mouth, she waited for the rider to reach them.

She could scarcely believe her eyes when the rider was close enough for them to ascertain his identity. It was Levi. He was covered in sweat, his clothes were torn and dirty, and his horse looked as if she was about to collapse, too.

“Coltfield!” Ambrose exclaimed. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Catherine,” Levi called through heaving breaths. “Catherine! Please, tell me I am not too late.”

CHAPTER 21



Catherine looked at Levi in horror. The horrendous state that he was in dominated her feelings. She could think of nothing else, despite the very surprising nature of his sudden and unannounced appearance at her brother's house.

He looked utterly exhausted. He was covered in sweat, and his jacket was muddy and torn. He looked as if he had not slept for days. His horse was not in much better shape, its fur shining with perspiration and froth around its mouth where the bit was positioned.

He jumped off his horse and lurched forward as he landed on the ground with a thud, clouds of dust arising around his feet. For an awful moment, Catherine thought that he was going to fall over and collapse on the ground. Ambrose leaped forward, his arms outstretched, and Catherine could tell that he thought the same and wanted to be ready to catch him.

But Levi waved him away. As he lifted his hands, Catherine could see great red welts across his palms from where he had been gripping the reins.

What on earth could have caused him to ride to her brother's house like this? Her heart began to race as she considered all

the possibilities.

“Coltfield, you look as if you have been to hell and back!” Ambrose said, still standing close to Levi, still poised to catch him if he fell.

Levi nodded briefly. “I feel as if I have, honestly,” he panted.

He stepped forward, moving closer to Catherine. All the time, his eyes had been fixed on hers. Her heart was pounding now.

Surely he would not have come all this way if he did not have anything significant to say to her? But why did he not speak? She waited impatiently for him to explain what he was doing there and why he had ridden like a madman across the countryside to see her.

He stared at her and opened his mouth, but she could see that he was struggling to get the words out.

“Levi, what is it? Why have you come?” Catherine whispered, moving towards him.

“Tell me, Catherine, is it too late?”

“Too late for what?”

“Have you accepted Lord Stonewich’s proposal?”

Catherine gasped. If he was so desperate to know the answer to this question, then did that mean that he...

Before she could finish the thought, though, Levi collapsed to his knees on the ground in front of her.

Ambrose leaped forward. "Catherine, you must call for Neil. I need his help. And send for someone to come and take care of this poor horse!"

Catherine ran into the house and rang the bell for a servant. One of the footmen appeared immediately, and she sent him to go fetch the groom to take the horse to the stables. Then, she ran to the library to fetch Neil.

"Brother, you are needed," she panted. "Please, you must come outside!"

"What's going on?" Neil asked, jumping up from the chair behind his desk, looking worried. "Is there some emergency?"

"It's Levi!" she said. "Come on, Neil, now!"

"Levi? What on earth is he doing here?" Neil asked, then clearly realizing that Catherine was not going to give him any more information, he followed her down the corridor.

When they got outside, Levi was still on the ground. Ambrose was trying to pull him to his feet and groaning with the exertion, but Levi was not able to move sufficiently to help him with the maneuver.

“Wait, man, you’ll hurt yourself!” Neil called, striding forward and then taking hold of one of Levi’s arms and lifting it over his shoulder. “Let’s take one side each and bring him into the parlor, and then we can work out what to do next.”

Neil and Ambrose carried Levi inside, and Catherine exchanged a worried glance with Isabel, who had stood on the steps, wide-eyed in shock, as events played out in front of her.

“What on earth is going on?” Isabel whispered. “Do you think he has come here to propose to you?”

Catherine took a deep breath. “Honestly, I have no idea, but the most important thing now is to help him recover. We can talk later about the reason for this insane journey he seems to have embarked upon.”

Her mind was racing as she followed the men down the corridor and towards the parlor. They placed Levi on the sofa. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them suddenly.

“You cannot leave me lying here! I am filthy, I will ruin the sofa!”

Neil laughed. “I think that should be the least of your worries, don’t you?”

Levi sighed. “I do not know,” he murmured, then leaned back and closed his eyes again.

Neil turned to Catherine. "I have no idea what is going on here, but I think Levi needs some refreshments. Perhaps you could call for some tea, and maybe some brandy? And perhaps some bread and cheese?"

Catherine shook her head. "He doesn't like brandy," she said firmly. "I think he would prefer a glass of wine to fortify him. And some cake. He much prefers that to cheese."

Neil gave a wry smile. "I see that you know Levi's tastes far better than I do," he replied. "You must order what you see fit. I will leave it to you."

Catherine scurried off to the kitchen to ask the cook to bring what was required, then ran back to the parlor. She did not want to be away too long, in case something else happened.

Perhaps they should have called a physician? She did not know what to do for the best. It was not every day that a gentleman turned up on one's doorstep in such a state.

Levi lay quietly for a while, and then when the refreshments arrived, he managed to sit up and take a sip of wine and a bite of cake.

"You remembered," he whispered, staring at Catherine.

"Remembered what?" she asked.

"I cannot even remember when I told you that I don't like brandy," he replied.

“It was one evening during the house party,” she said. “You came into the drawing room with the other gentlemen after dinner, and you told me that you had been keen to escape the dining table because you did not want to drink endless glasses of brandy and you would much prefer a glass of wine.”

He smiled. “So I did.” He took another bite of cake. “And this cake is delicious. It is just what I needed.”

“I remembered how fond you were of cake, too,” Catherine added. Then, she looked at him sternly. “When did you last sleep, Levi? You look an absolute fright. I hope you will forgive me for saying so, but it is true. I don’t think I have ever seen a man in such a sorry state. How long have you been riding for?”

He sighed. “I left my estate yesterday,” he confessed.

“And you have not stopped riding since then?”

“Hardly,” he said, a little ruefully.

“Your poor horse! Having to ride through the night!”

“I know,” Levi replied. “I am rather ashamed that she is so exhausted, but she is strong, and I knew she could manage it.” He paused. “Please, can you make sure that your groom gives her some warm oats?”

Neil nodded. "I am sure that Mr. Smith will know exactly what to do to help her recover from her ordeal."

"But anything could have happened to you!" Catherine went on, beginning to feel a little angry with Levi for putting himself at so much risk.

"Lady Catherine, I am flattered that you should care," Levi said, still holding her gaze.

"Oh, it does not matter about me," she huffed. "What about you? So many people depend on you, and it is as if you do not care about yourself at all! I am sure you have not eaten for hours or had enough to drink. And I cannot get over the state of your poor horse, whom you profess to love so much."

Levi shook his head. "You are right, Catherine, of course you are. Perhaps I should have come in the carriage, but you see, I knew that coming on Molly would be faster."

"But what about bandits?" Catherine went on.

She could not believe how stupid he had been, to put himself at so much risk. She imagined for a moment how she would feel if he had had an accident on the way. It did not bear thinking about.

In front of her on the sofa, Levi chuckled.

"I do not know what there is to laugh about, Your Grace," Catherine huffed. "You have behaved like a man possessed,

and you still have not explained why.”

“Catherine,” he whispered. “Come a little closer to me.”

She looked around to see the others who were present in the room exchanging knowing looks. Isabel took Ambrose’s hand and pulled him away to the other side of the room, and Neil followed suit.

Catherine moved closer so that she could hear Levi properly.

“I would like it,” Levi said softly, “if I could have the privilege of hearing you scold me like that every day of my life.”

She stared at him, shocked. Could it possibly be that he meant what she thought he meant?

“It makes my heart swell to think that you should care about me enough to be angry that I have taken risks, that you should care enough to remember that I do not like brandy, and to remember the type of cake that I like the most.”

Catherine was speechless. She held her breath, hoping against hope that what was going to come next was what she had been wishing for for many weeks now.



Levi watched Catherine’s face as she absorbed what he had just said. He knew, then, that he had been right to come here in such a dramatic manner. He could not have waited another moment.

However, he realized that she still had not answered his question about Lord Stonewich, although he thought that in his heart, now, he knew the answer.

“Please, Catherine, will you tell me finally? Have you agreed to marry Lord Stonewich?”

She shook her head. “No, I have not,” she said firmly.

Levi thought that his heart might burst with joy. He had hoped against hope that she would have held firm and not agreed to marry a man she did not love, but now at last she had confirmed it. There was only one more thing to do.

He heaved himself up into a sitting position, forcing himself to ignore the pain that wracked his body from his long and arduous ride.

“Levi, you should rest!” Catherine protested, looking at him with worried eyes.

“Oh, Catherine, there will be plenty of time to rest afterward. But first, there is something very important that I must do. Something that I should have done a long time ago.”

CHAPTER 22



Levi lifted himself off the sofa and knelt before her. His legs were screaming in pain, but he pushed through the feelings. This was more important than anything he had ever done before in his life, and he wanted to get it right.

Catherine looked down at him, her eyes wide with amazement.

“Catherine, it is high time that I told you that I have been in love with you since the first moment we met. I will remember it always, watching you chatting with your friends and thinking how beautiful you were. And then, when we were conversing together, I thought that you were the most vivacious, witty young lady I had ever met. But then, the news of my father’s illness tore me away from you.”

Catherine nodded. He could see from the look in her eyes that she remembered every detail of their first meeting, too.

“I have thought back to that day, Catherine, and cursed myself that I did not find some excuse in the following weeks and months to see you again. But I was too foolish to realize what a treasure you were, and I got swept up in my life again. I did not even think about my poor brother, who inherited the dukedom many years before he expected to.”

“Levi, you must not torture yourself with regrets from the past,” Catherine said. “We have made mistakes, both of us. There are many things that I wish I had done differently.”

“You have done nothing wrong,” Levi insisted.

Catherine shook her head. “No, I was very wrong to judge you for looking for a wife with a dowry, and I was wrong to spread rumors about you. You were perfectly entitled to do what you did. It is only what half the gentlemen of the *ton* do already, and some of the ladies, too. But I let my own beliefs about what a marriage should be based upon cloud my judgment, and I was wrong to do that.”

Levi could bear it no longer. He reached for her hands. “Catherine, you must know that you are the only woman I want. I want to be by your side for the rest of my days.”

Catherine stared at him, her lips parted and her eyes wide with wonder. He felt sure, now, from the way she was looking at him, that she felt the same as he did.

“Catherine, will you be my wife?”

There was a pause, and Levi felt as if time had stopped. He waited for her to reply, knowing that he had never wanted to hear anything more in his life than a word of acceptance from her lips.

She bit her lip, a rather anxious look on her face. “But, Levi, what about the debt that you must repay? What about your

plan to save your estate?" She paused and frowned. "You know that I have no dowry."

Standing a little way behind them, Neil coughed. Levi turned to look at him briefly, and Neil raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Levi shrugged. "The plan was flawed. I do not think I could ever have married without love. And love is what I feel for you, Catherine. I am sure that, by your side, I will find a way. I honestly believe that I can find a way through anything if you will agree to be my wife."

Catherine laughed, and he looked at her in surprise.

"I think you are rather foolish to overestimate my powers to change your life," she said, her face breaking out into a smile.

Levi held his breath, waiting for her to answer his question.

At last, she nodded. "I will be your wife, Levi. It is all I have wanted for many weeks now, and I am glad that at last you have seen sense." She grinned and then turned to Neil. "That is if you will give your consent, too, Brother?"

Neil stepped forward. Levi had almost forgotten that he, Isabel, and Ambrose were still in the room. They all had beaming smiles on their face as they looked at Catherine and Levi.

“Of course, I will give my consent,” Neil said. “I have been hoping for a while now that this is what would happen. I knew that Catherine wanted to marry for love, and I knew that she had fallen in love with you, Levi, so I am relieved that, finally, you have managed to agree that the best thing for both of you is to be together.”

Levi smiled, feeling a surge of joy in his heart. He lifted himself up and sat down on the sofa again, and Catherine sat next to him. He noticed that she was sitting a little closer to him than she had ever had before.

“I know that we have taken our time, and maybe we have gone about things in a rather unconventional way, but I am happier than I could possibly describe to be able to say that you will be my wife, Catherine.”

She beamed at him, and he thought that he was looking forward to a moment when they could be alone together and he could feel her lips on his again.

Neil’s voice interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up swiftly to face the man who was to be his brother-in-law.

“About this dowry...” Neil began.

“Neil!” Catherine gasped, looking rather embarrassed.

Neil held up his hand. “I am your brother, and I am responsible for you, so you will have to let me speak.” He turned to Levi. “There is no way on earth that I would not give my sister a dowry. I am sure that you understand that I went

along with what Catherine said she wanted when she was so distressed at the thought of falling victim to fortune hunters after her first Season. But the money has always been put aside for her. It is my duty to provide for her, even if she insists that she does not want the money.”

Catherine glanced at Levi. “Did you know about this?”

Levi shook his head. “I had no idea, Catherine, I promise you.”

Neil nodded. “He is right, Catherine. I have not discussed this with anyone up until now. But the money is there, and you shall have it after your wedding. You can decide together what you will do with it.”

Levi felt a lurch in his stomach at the news he had just received. Could it be that all his troubles were over? He could use the money to pay off his debts, and everything would be all right again.

But when he glanced at Catherine, he realized that he could do no such thing. He was determined that she would trust him and believe that he had not married her for her money, but for herself.

“I will not touch the money,” he said firmly. “I am most grateful to you, Neil, for this gesture, but I will not use it to pay off any debts. Catherine and I will discuss it together and find an investment for our future, or our children’s futures. I am convinced that is the right thing to do.”

He looked at Catherine again and saw that she was smiling. He felt a surge of relief. He knew how much it mattered to her that their marriage was based on love, rather than money, and he could see from the look in her eyes that she trusted and believed in him.

“Well, I am glad that that is all finally settled,” Neil said, smiling. “Isabel, Ambrose, I know that you were planning to leave today, but it is getting rather late, and I suspect that you do not want to be traveling through the night, despite the example set to us by our intrepid friend here.” He looked at Levi and grinned.

“I think you are right, Neil,” Ambrose agreed. “If it suits you, we will stay tonight and leave in the morning.”

Neil nodded. “I think a celebratory dinner is called for. I shall ask Lydia to discuss with the cook and see what we can do.”

“A celebratory dinner?” a voice came through the open door, and a second later, a young man with a mop of unruly dark hair appeared. The resemblance between him and Neil was immediately apparent.

“Ah, Gabriel, I had been wondering where you were hiding!” Neil said, looking at his brother fondly.

“I have been in my study, reading,” Gabriel replied. “That is where I am almost all the time, these days!”

“You have been neglecting your precious horses, then?” Catherine teased.

“They have not been neglected!” Gabriel insisted. “They are perfectly well looked after, and I have been to see them every day. But I simply have not had time to go out riding every day, like I used to, now that I am older.” He puffed up his chest a little with those final words.

Neil nodded. “And I am very impressed with your diligence.”

“What have I missed?” Gabriel asked, looking in the direction of the sofa and seeing Levi and Catherine sitting close together.

Catherine laughed. “You have missed a great deal, Gabriel!”

Neil stepped forward and performed the introductions. “Levi, this is Gabriel, our younger brother, if you had not already guessed, and, Gabriel, this is Levi, the Duke of Coltfoot. He has just asked Catherine to marry him, and she has accepted.”

“Forgive my rather disheveled appearance, Gabriel,” Levi said, getting to his feet in a rather labored fashion and reaching out to shake Gabriel’s hand. “I had a rather long ride to get here, but I must confess that I am very glad I made the effort.”

“Why do I always miss out when anything exciting happens?” Gabriel huffed. Then, he turned to Levi. “I am very glad to meet you, of course. We all thought that Catherine would never marry, so it’s a relief to everyone!”

Catherine turned and glared at him. “We shall all be waiting with bated breath to see how things turn out when it is your

turn to look for a wife!”

“The most important thing,” Isabel said, looking around at the happy group gathered around the sofa, “is that Catherine and Levi have found happiness together, at last. And we shall have a wedding to look forward to!”

“Who knows, Gabriel, perhaps you will meet your future wife at our wedding?” Catherine teased.

Gabriel let out a snort. “I am the youngest son, I have no need to marry. I intend to spend my life doing exactly as I please!”

Levi laughed. “Perhaps you and I will have to have a chat about that one day, Gabriel.” He turned to Catherine. “But not now. I shall not let anything distract me from my happiness today.”

Catherine held his gaze, and he thought he might burst with joy.

“Nor mine,” she whispered. “I am glad that you rode through the night, Levi, even though it was a stupid and dangerous thing to do. I am more glad than you could possibly imagine.”

“So am I,” he replied.

EPILOGUE



Levi glanced at Catherine as the carriage pulled up outside Sophia's house. He thought that she looked rather nervous, which was uncharacteristic of her.

"Catherine, you cannot possibly be nervous? That is not something that I think I have ever seen in you."

She shook her head and looked at him a little archly. "Of course, I am not nervous! Why would I be?"

He watched, though, as she turned away from him to stare out of the window.

He reached out and took her hand. "Catherine, you do not need to pretend with me," he said gently. "There is no need to be anxious, I promise you. My sister is very kind, and she is very much looking forward to meeting you. I am convinced that she will love you as much as I do."

Catherine smiled. "I am nervous because you love her so much, and I want her to like me."

Levi grinned. “How could she not like you? Honestly, Catherine, please do not worry. I promise that everything will be fine.”

They climbed out of the carriage, Catherine’s maid following them. She had come as a chaperone, since Catherine and Levi were not yet married.

Before they had even reached the bottom of the steps, the front door flew open, and the two children ran out to greet them, followed by their mother.

“Lebi!” Emma cried.

Levi scooped her up into a hug immediately and ruffled Charlotte’s hair. “It is wonderful to see you both, as always!”

Catherine swallowed down her nerves and went to greet Sophia. “It is a pleasure to meet you, My Lady,” she said, bobbing a curtsy.

Sophia smiled at her. “There is no need for formalities, my dear. You must call me Sophia, and I will call you Catherine if you will permit it?”

Catherine felt a surge of relief at Sophia’s friendliness. She had hoped that their meeting would flow smoothly, and they were off to a good start already.

They went into the parlor, where some of the children’s toys were spread out on the floor.

“You must forgive the mess,” Sophia said, with a chuckle. “I am afraid that we do not run a very tight ship here when it comes to keeping things tidy. I am sure that I should try harder to teach the girls to tidy up after themselves, but there are always more fun things to do, in all honesty!”

Catherine smiled. “It rather reminds me of what our home used to be like when we were children,” she said.

“Levi tells me you have two brothers and a sister. What a joy to have so many siblings!” Sophia remarked.

“Indeed. I am very lucky to have them, and we are very close. My brother Neil has been very kind to us.”

Levi nodded. “Neil is a most generous man, and I have been talking with him a lot recently about how he manages his estate. I have a lot to learn from him.”

Sophia called for tea, and the children begged for cake. She conceded to their demands, and Catherine smiled as she saw Levi’s face light up. “Oh, I hope that it is your cook’s excellent sponge cake!”

Levi’s appetite for cake was one of the little quirks that Catherine loved most about him. She had been practicing her pastry skills at home since their engagement so that when they were married, she could surprise him by making him things that he would enjoy. As she looked at him now, she thought once again how much she was looking forward to becoming his wife.

Sophia laughed. "I think that she heard that you were coming and baked one specially for the occasion. I do not know how you do it, Levi, managing to get cooks all over the country to pander to your desires!"

"I would be grateful for anything, you know that, but the truth is that her sponge cake is the best in the world."

A little while later, when everyone's fingers were sticky with cake, Sophia suggested that they all go outside into the garden to give the children a chance to run around and use up some of their impressive energy.

Levi immediately began to chase the children around the lawn, while Catherine and Sophia sat in chairs on the terrace and watched them playing.

"He is a very devoted uncle," Catherine observed, her heart warming to see how attentive Levi was to the children.

"Indeed, he is. The children are very lucky," Sophia replied. "You will meet my oldest daughter, Eliza, at dinner time. She is out riding with her governess, at present. I think that you will like her very much. I sense that there is something rather similar about your characters, and she will be delighted to meet her new aunt."

Catherine chuckled. "I had not quite thought of it like that, but I am excited to be an aunt."

And a mother, too.

It had been one of her first thoughts when she had seen Levi with his nieces, that he would make a wonderful father. She could not wait to start a family with him.

“I am very glad to meet you, Catherine,” Sophia said earnestly. “I know that you know most of our history as a family and that you understand how much Levi has been through. He took the death of our brother very hard. And it was even harder, since we had lost our father only a year before. The grief was there in Levi’s heart, even though he did not acknowledge it.”

Catherine nodded. “I know that he has struggled very much with inheriting the title.”

“Yes, indeed. Our father did not treat him fairly when we were growing up. Theodore got all the attention. It is no wonder that Levi became such a free spirit. So, when it was all taken from him – well, it was very hard for him.”

“I promise you, Sophia, that I will take good care of him,” Catherine said in a low voice.

She looked at Levi romping on the grass with his nieces, taking turns to run up and down the lawn with them on his back, and she thought that never in her life had she uttered words that she meant so much.

Sophia’s face opened up into a warm smile. “I know that you will, my dear. I can see from the look on your face how much you love him, and I entrust him entirely to you. Please, though, make sure that you come and visit us often. The girls dote on

him, as you see, and we have been used to seeing each other very often over the last few months, at least.”

Catherine nodded. “I promise. Family is very important to me, as I am sure you can imagine for someone who has so many siblings! Perhaps one day we can gather all the children together for a picnic and they can all play together. They will be cousins, of sorts, I suppose!”

“That is a wonderful idea!” Sophia agreed happily.

They sat quietly for a while, watching as the children gamboled about. They did not seem to be getting tired at all, despite Levi’s obvious efforts to exhaust them with running races and games.

“You must help him, Catherine, to remember who he is,” Sophia said.

Catherine looked at her a little curiously. “I am not sure what you mean.”

“He has railed so hard against his fate, but now he seems to be finally accepting it. He will be a fine duke, and you will be a fine duchess, I have no doubt about it.”

Catherine smiled and marveled for a moment about how much things had changed in just the space of a few weeks. She had been on the verge of giving up hope of ever meeting a gentleman she could love, and now she was about to embark on a shared life with the most wonderful person she had ever met.

She had no doubt that theirs would be a happy life, full of laughter, fun, and adventure.

“I don’t know if Levi has told you that we are planning to travel around the Continent for a while for our honeymoon?” she said after a while.

Sophia nodded. “I think it is a wonderful idea. Levi loves to travel, and he told me that you, too, have a deep desire to see the world.”

“I do, and I am so grateful that I will get to see something of it by Levi’s side.”

“And he is happy to leave the estate for a while?” Sophia asked.

Catherine nodded. “My brother, Neil, has recommended a man to act as an estate manager while we are away from home, and Levi seems to be happy with the arrangement. I think that everything will turn out well.”

She looked across the lawn to see Levi approaching, carrying Emma on his back and leading Charlotte by the hand.

“I think that these two are finally ready to go inside,” he announced. “They are covered in grass stains and mud, so I do hope that their nanny won’t scold them. If she does, you must send her to me for a telling-off, as it is all my fault.”

The girls giggled.

“Will you tell us a story later?” Charlotte asked, her eyes wide as she looked up at him.

“Of course,” he replied. “But first, I am going to take your aunt Catherine for a walk around the garden before dinner, if that is okay with the pair of you?”

They nodded, and Catherine couldn't help but smile. They really were adorable children.

Sophia ushered the girls inside, then turned to face them. “Take your time in the garden,” she said. “The roses are very lovely at the moment, make sure that you do not miss them.”

Levi nodded and took Catherine's arm. “We shall see you shortly before dinner.”



Every time Levi looked at Catherine, he could hardly believe his luck. Not only was she beautiful, but she was also vivacious and witty, and finally, after all these weeks of confusion and misunderstanding, they were together.

He did not want their engagement to be a long one, and plans were already falling into place for their wedding. He was determined to host it at the Coltfoot estate, just as Michael had hosted his own wedding at his home, but it was the first large event he had held since becoming a duke, and there was rather a lot to organize.

He and Catherine discussed some of the details of the wedding as they walked down the path towards the rose garden. Levi felt a surge of pleasure, and he sensed Catherine leaning in to be closer to him. His heart still skipped a beat when she was near, and he hoped that the feeling would never go away.

“Catherine, there is something else I wanted to discuss with you,” he said as they reached the rose garden. There was a bench on the edge of the lawn, and they sat down together.

“You can tell me anything, Levi, you know that.”

He took her hand in his, feeling the softness of the skin on her fingers. “I had a long conversation with John, Sophia’s husband, earlier in the week. I meant to tell you sooner, but we have been so caught up with making plans for the wedding and the honeymoon that the moment has not yet arisen.”

Catherine looked up with interest. “Oh? What did you discuss?”

“Well, it seems that those initial small investments that I made, following his advice, have been very successful. There are some new mines being built in the north. He thinks that this would be a perfect opportunity for us to make further investments, and that we could expect a handsome return in a few years’ time. What do you think?”

Catherine grinned. “Levi, you know that there are not many gentlemen who would consult their wives on such a decision as this? It is rather extraordinary.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, Catherine, that is because you are an extraordinary woman. I do not want to make any important decisions without discussing them with you first.”

She paused for a moment. “It sounds very interesting. Do you think that John would be prepared to discuss it in a little more detail with us while we are here on our visit? I should like to understand it a bit more before we come to a decision.”

Levi nodded. “Of course, that is exactly what I was going to suggest. Let’s ask him to meet with us in the morning to discuss it.”

“Thank you, Levi, for telling me. I know that it comes naturally to you to behave like this towards me, but it would not be natural for many men. I am truly grateful that we have found each other.”

Levi nodded. “I feel just the same, dear Catherine. I am sure that one day it will be normal for a man to consult his wife on important decisions, but until that day comes, I am happy to go against the grain.”

He placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. His heart skipped a beat as he remembered the first time they had kissed. It had been Catherine who had made the decision, who had made the move towards him. He had never known a woman like her before in his life, and he thanked the heavens every day that now she would be by his side every day for the rest of his life.

He pressed his lips against hers and felt her body melt into his. A sense of warmth and peace coursed through him.

“I love you, Catherine,” he whispered, stroking her hair and marveling at its softness.

“I love you too, Levi,” Catherine breathed. “And I cannot wait to be your wife.”

The End?

**WILL YOU GIVE ME YOUR
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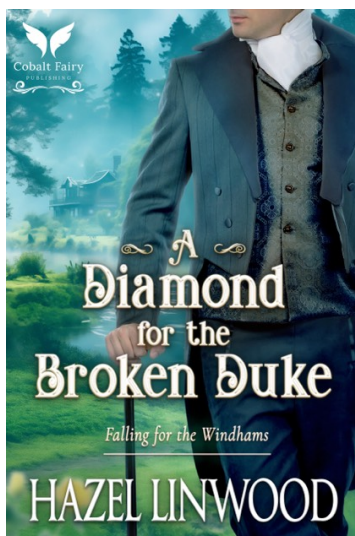
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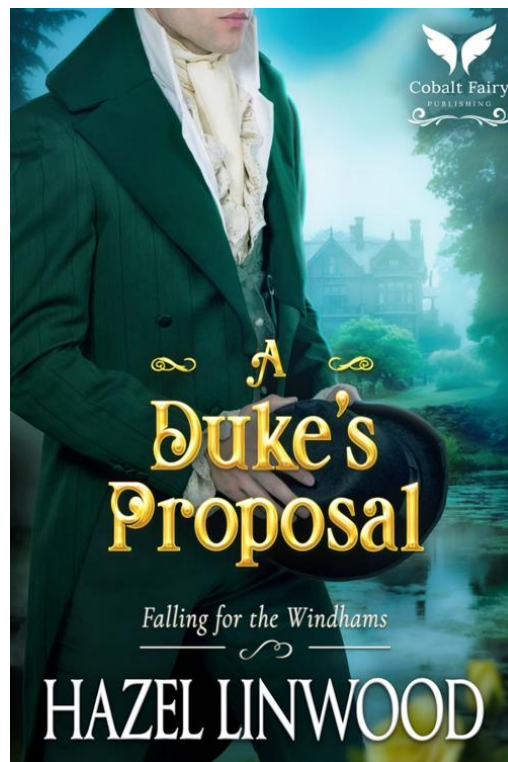
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PREVIEW: A DUKE'S PROPOSAL



Turn to the next page to read the first chapter of the second book in this series, *“A Duke’s Proposal”*!



CHAPTER ONE



Michael strode purposefully down the corridor, feeling the anger building up inside him. He always tried to be an even-tempered man, slow to anger, and considerate in all his dealings with others, but this latest news had pushed him over the edge. He would not stand for it, not this time.

He burst through the door of his father's study, not bothering to knock. He knew that this in itself would irritate the old Duke intensely, but he did not care.

His father was sitting behind his large, ornately-carved mahogany desk. He looked up in surprise as Michael entered the room.

"Michael, I did not expect to see you this afternoon," he said in an even tone, although the crinkles around his blue eyes gave away the fact that he could sense Michael's displeasure. "I thought you had gone riding? It is such a fine day outside. I rather wished I could have joined you, but duty calls, you see." He waved his hand in the direction of the stack of papers in front of him on the desk. "All this will be yours to deal with one day, my boy."

Michael huffed. He was not in the mood for one of his father's lectures about the duties of a duke. "I did not go riding," he said flatly. "I was in my chamber, preparing to go out, when Benson told me about your visitor this morning." He could hear the slightly strained tone in his voice as he tried to keep his composure.

“My visitor?” His father frowned. “I see so many people, you know. I’m not sure I quite know who you mean.”

A flash of anger exploded in Michael’s brain. They were skirting around the edges of the matter in hand, and it was too important for all that. Enough was enough. “You know full well who I mean, Father,” he said. “I have made my feelings on the matter quite clear, and yet you continue to persist in your scheming. I will not marry her!”

Aaron Dunn, the Duke of Vidal, leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtfully at his only son. “Ah,” he said, pressing his hands together in front of him and letting out a sigh. “You have found me out, then.” He paused. “I thought I had done rather well. Benson is a sly fox for discovering it.”

Michael shook his head in disbelief. “It does not matter how Benson found out! He told me that the Earl of Gleeson visited you this morning and that the whole household now knows of your plan to marry me off to Lady Dorothy Sempill.”

“Michael, please calm down,” Aaron said. “Will you not sit down? You are making me dizzy, pacing around like that.”

“No, I will not sit down!” Michael said, raising his voice. “I have told you so many times now that this plan of yours is not acceptable to me, and yet you continue to plot with the old Earl. If you think I am going to roll over and give in, then you are much mistaken.”

“I think, my boy, that you will realize what’s good for you in the end,” the old Duke said. “This marriage between you and Lady Dorothy has been discussed between our two families for many years.”

“I do not care about that,” Michael said firmly. “She is a spoilt, unpleasant young lady, and I have no intention of marrying her. I have no desire to spend the rest of my life with such a person.”

Aaron let out a sigh. “I am sure that you are quite mistaken in her character,” he replied. “She has been perfectly brought up to be a duchess. It has been the whole purpose of her

education, in fact. She is beautiful and accomplished. She is exactly the sort of young lady you should be marrying.”

“She is not,” Michael replied. “You have not seen the way she behaves when she thinks no one is looking. I could never marry someone like that. Never!”

Aaron stood up and moved from behind the desk to stand closer to his son. “Michael, you are going to inherit the dukedom when I’m dead. There is no one else. You have known this all your life. And you must marry someone with money! The estate won’t pay for itself forever, you know, and Lady Dorothy’s father is a rich man. Her dowry could be the difference between us having to sell off some land and being able to keep the lands of the dukedom intact.”

Michael bit his lip. He knew how much the integrity of the dukedom mattered to his father, and how much it would distress him to have to split the land. But he shook his head. “There must be another way,” he insisted. “I have told you, Father, that I do not intend to marry at all. And I have not changed my mind.”

Aaron stared at him. “I had hoped, Michael, that you would outgrow this childish fantasy! One day you will have to face facts. You are going to be a duke. Dukes need heirs. You must marry. And Lady Dorothy would be the perfect duchess to stand by your side when you take over the dukedom.”

Michael’s heart was pounding in his chest with fury and indignation. What more did he have to do to get his father to listen to him? “I will never marry her, Father. I swear it. I will never marry that young lady. I swear it to you, I will never marry at all.”

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, just as noisily as he had entered it.

Childish? How dare his father call him childish. No, he knew what kind of man he was, and he was not a man who would ever contemplate marriage to a woman like Lady Dorothy Sempill.



Constance felt the usual flutter of excitement in her chest as she entered the ballroom, arm in arm with her sister Catherine. They followed behind her brother Neil, the Duke of Whitewell, and his wife Lydia, now the Duchess, who had fitted so well into the family since their one and a half years ago.

No matter how many balls she had attended – and after four Seasons out in society, she had attended perhaps more than she would care to admit – Constance always felt that same surge of adrenalin as she took in the glittering lights and buzzing atmosphere at the start of a ball. Who would be there? What would happen? Would she meet anyone new?

She sighed softly. There would be no one new, she was sure of it. It would just be the same people that she mixed with at every ball. The same people who made up their social circle in the *ton*.

Neil led Lydia across the room towards a group of friends, and they all began talking animatedly. Constance smiled to see her brother looking so happy. Just a few years ago, she would never have imagined that he would be so content in his life. But now, he had found his soulmate.

Catherine, by her side, drew her towards the refreshment table and they both took a glass of lemonade, then went to stand by a large display of flowers in one corner of the room. Constance knew that Catherine would be desperate to chat with other people and to find herself some dancing partners, but her sister was kind, as much as vivacious. Catherine would know that Constance would be nervous, as she was at every ball, and that she needed a few moments to compose herself.

“Have you heard who will be here tonight?” Catherine whispered, scanning the room as she sipped her drink.

“I could not guess,” Constance replied. She enjoyed a ball as much as any other young lady, but she tried not to listen to the

gossip of the *ton*. She knew from experience that it often was not true.

“The Marquess of Vaughan is coming!” The excitement was clear in Catherine’s voice, and her brown eyes were wide.

“I thought he was living abroad.”

“Indeed, he has been for quite some time, but he is home now, and he is the most eligible bachelor of the Season!”

Constance nodded. The son of a duke, made mysterious by a long absence abroad; of course, the rumor of his attendance tonight would cause a flutter of excitement amongst the young ladies in the ballroom, and their mamas too, no doubt. She almost felt sorry for the Marquess; every eye would be on him, the moment he entered the room. But she was curious, too.

“He is said to be very handsome,” she said softly. It would not do for them to be overheard talking about a particular gentleman in this manner, it would be considered highly improper. “You must be excited to meet him,” she added, looking at her sister.

She knew that Catherine had high hopes of making an illustrious match, and as the younger sister of a duke, there was no reason why she should not.

“I confess I am most curious to see him,” Catherine replied, keeping her own voice low to match her sister’s. “Everyone says that he is very charming, and I do very much hope to make his acquaintance tonight.” She looked around the room again, and Constance could sense that she was eager to dance.

At that moment, Constance saw Neil approaching them with a gentleman she did not recognize. He had a pleasant-looking face, sandy hair, and a nervous smile on his lips.

“Catherine, I would like to introduce you to George Tulk, the Viscount of Spenhood,” Neil said formally as the sandy-haired gentleman stepped forward and bowed to them. “And this is my elder sister, Lady Constance Windham.”

Constance smiled, but the gentleman’s eyes were fixed on Catherine.

“Lady Catherine, I was hoping that you might consent to join me for the first dance?” he asked, his voice trembling a little as he spoke. “I believe that the music is just about to start.” He glanced over at the dance floor, where, sure enough, the musicians were just beginning to tune their instruments in preparation for the opening of the ball.

Catherine smiled her sweetest smile. “I should be delighted, My Lord,” she replied.

The Viscount took her arm and led her off towards the dance floor, leaving Constance standing with Neil.

“Your time will come, Constance,” Neil said, patting her arm in a reassuring manner.

“I am not so sure about that,” she replied with a sigh.

She wanted her sister to be happy, and to make a happy match, of course, but she could not help but feel a pang of jealousy as she watched her taking to the floor opposite the Viscount, preparing to start the dance with him.

An older gentleman approached them and began to talk to Neil about some matter of business – something to do with some land he wanted to buy – and Constance moved away from them to stand on her own, looking around the room. She tried to look approachable, in case any young man wanted to ask her to dance, but no one came near.

A little while later, Lydia came over, carrying two glasses of punch. “I thought you looked like you could use a pick-me-up,” she said with a smile, handing a drink to Constance.

Constance smiled and took a sip of the drink, its fruity taste making her mouth tingle. “Indeed,” she replied. “Thank you, you are very kind.”

Lydia shrugged. “It is nothing. I thought you looked a little lonely, standing here while Catherine is off dancing, and your brother is having perhaps the most boring conversation imaginable!” She glanced over to where Neil was standing close by, still deeply entrenched with the older gentleman.

Constance laughed. “Well, I suppose, for some of us, balls are for dancing, but for others, they are the perfect opportunity to

talk business.”

“Indeed, but they are talking about fence posts, of all things. In a ballroom!”

The two ladies stood together for a while in silence, before Lydia spoke again. “Constance, forgive me if I intrude in your private feelings too much, but I thought you seemed rather sad, just now?”

Constance sighed. “You know me so well,” she replied, somewhat ruefully. “I confess that I am not enjoying this ball as much as I had hoped.”

Lydia placed a gentle hand on her arm. “What is it that troubles you?”

Constance paused. Could she unburden her feelings onto Lydia? She did not see any reason why not to. They were as close as sisters now.

“It is my fourth Season, Lydia,” she said softly. “You know what that means. I am almost a spinster. I am beginning to lose hope.”

“You must not think like that, Constance!” Lydia replied. “You are still young. There is plenty of time for you to find the right gentleman. It is not a decision that should be rushed, you know.”

“Oh, indeed, it is not something I would ever want to rush,” Constance replied, “but I have never even got close, in these last four years. And all that I want is to find love, and to have a family.”

There was a wobble in her voice, and she took a deep breath. Sharing her feelings with a close friend was one thing, but weeping in a ballroom was something else entirely.

“I simply do not know how to flirt with them, you see. These gentlemen, if I ever find myself talking to one I like, I do not know what to say. And the other young ladies, well, it seems to come so naturally to them. I cannot compete, you see. I don’t have a chance!” She tried to laugh but she knew that it sounded hollow.

Lydia held her gaze for a moment, her green eyes thoughtful. “You know, it was the same for me,” she whispered, looking sideways to where Neil was standing a little distance away. “I did not know how to attract suitors. Even when things were desperate and my sister and I needed to find husbands to save our father’s estate, things did not come naturally to me. But I was lucky, you see. When your brother came along, everything fell into place.” She smiled, her face glowing. “And it will be the same for you when the right man comes along. You will not have to worry about flirting and all that nonsense. It will feel natural, and easy.”

Constance returned her smile, thinking once again how happy she was that her brother had found such a perfect partner to share his life with. Perhaps it was not too late. She was not the sort of young lady to mope about and give up hope. She stood up a little straighter and looked around the room.

“Perhaps you are right, Lydia,” she said. “If you managed to find happiness with a man who is deeply interested in fence posts, then there is hope for us all!”

Lydia laughed gently. “It will happen for you, my dear, I am sure of it.”

Constance cast her eye around the room and saw Catherine smiling happily as she danced with the Viscount. She would try, just for this evening, to forget her worries and enjoy herself.

“I wonder, Lydia, if the famous Marquess of Vaughan really will grace us with his presence this evening,” she said, turning towards Lydia. “I am rather jealous that he is so famed for his charm. Would it not be a fine thing to be so naturally gifted at charming people and making them like you?”

“Indeed, it would, Constance,” Lydia agreed with a chuckle. “Indeed, it would.”

CHAPTER TWO



“The ladies of the *ton* will be delighted to see you, Lord Vaughan,” Levi said smoothly.

Michael glared at him. “Don’t talk such nonsense, Heathmile,” he bit out. “I am here to catch up with old friends, although perhaps I may change my mind about that if you carry on in this way.”

“But what did you expect? Your return will set things astir, you know it will,” Levi continued. “Especially after such a long time away.”

Michael noted a mischievous glint in his friend’s eye. He had been friends with Levi Galpin, the Marquess of Heathmile, for many years, and he resolved not to take his jibing too seriously, irritating as it was.

He took a hearty swig of his wine and sighed. “I suppose you are right,” he conceded. “I had not really thought about it. I simply wanted to come and have a good time. But I do seem to be attracting rather a lot of attention.”

From the moment he had arrived, he had felt the eyes of everyone on him, their curious gazes making him wince a little. He was not a shy man, but even he found this intense level of attention rather unsettling, especially as he had been away from Society for so long.

He looked around the room, then realized that he was only making it worse, as all the young ladies, standing in groups with their mothers and aunts, thought that he was looking at them, and all began to smile and giggle behind their fans.

He turned away and resolutely faced his friend. “Why is everyone so obsessed with the marriage mart?” he groaned. “It really is the most tedious thing imaginable.”

Levi chuckled and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair, which fell in waves almost down to his shoulders. “It is not tedious if you are looking for a wife, or indeed if you are a young lady looking for a husband, I should imagine!”

Michael shrugged. “You know full well that I am not looking for a wife tonight, and neither shall I ever be.”

He took another sip of his wine, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation as the liquid slid down his throat. He wished that it was possible simply to be at a ball and experience its delights, without everyone getting all worked up about who was going to get married to whom the moment anyone stepped onto the dance floor, or even so much as looked at each other for more than a heartbeat. Nothing went unnoticed in a ballroom; the slightest thing could trigger a rumor, or, indeed, a scandal.

Levi looked at him shrewdly. “Your father is still fixed on the idea of you marrying Lady Dorothy?”

Michael nodded. He had already told Levi about his father’s meeting with the Earl of Gleeson.

“He seems utterly fixed on the scheme. I do not understand what else I can say to him that will convince him that I will not marry her.” He felt a surge of frustration as he spoke.

A few days had passed since the argument with his father, and he found that he was still angry whenever he thought about it.

“But she is considered to be a very desirable young lady,” Levi said. “I understand that there are many gentlemen who think her to be very beautiful and elegant and that she has a great many suitors showing an interest in her.”

“Well, she would be far better off marrying one of them, then!” Michael retorted. “She could discourage her father from the match if she wanted to, but it seems that she is just as determined to make it happen as everyone else. I do not know what I have to do to make everyone realize that I am perfectly

serious in my refusal to marry her, or anyone else, for that matter.”

Levi sighed. “No one will believe that a future duke could be truly in earnest in their determination not to marry, Lord Vaughan. It is almost unheard of. What will become of the estate? Do you not think Lady Dorothy would make a fine duchess?”

“Indeed, I do not,” Michael said firmly. “I have known her for a long time, you know, Heathmire. We met when we were quite young. Our fathers are great friends, which, of course, is the root of the whole blessed problem. They have been plotting our marriage for years since we were barely out of our cradles, and neither of them can imagine a future where their plans do not come to fruition.”

“But what is it about her that is so terrible?” Levi asked, a look of confusion crossing his face. “I do not understand why you are so strongly against her. She seems to be a very proper young lady.”

“She is very good at hiding her true colors,” Michael said quietly. “You would not think it to look at her, but I have seen her being outrageously rude and imperious with her servants, and once too with a shopkeeper. It is awful to watch, Levi. You cannot imagine.”

“Indeed!” Levi said. “That is most surprising. I am glad that my father has never put so much pressure on me to marry, whoever the lady in question might be.”

“Well, perhaps that is one of the benefits of being a younger son,” Michael said, folding his arms with what he hoped was a sense of finality. He was growing rather tired of this conversation. “All that I can say is that she will never be the Duchess of Vidal when I become the Duke of Vidal.”

Levi looked beyond his friend and raised an eyebrow. “Well, it seems that nobody has broken that news to her yet.”

Michael turned around and felt his stomach drop as he saw Lady Dorothy Sempill striding across the ballroom towards them, her light green eyes flashing.



“Lord Vaughan,” Dorothy said smoothly, dropping a low curtsy in front of him.

Michael gritted his teeth and gave her a polite smile. Much as he wanted to turn on his heel and walk away, leaving her far behind, he knew that it would be unforgivably rude to do that, and in the middle of a ballroom too where everyone would see. He disliked her intensely, but despite his strong feelings, he would not act improperly towards her.

“Lady Dorothy,” he said simply, giving a stiff bow. Perhaps if he was curt in his replies, almost monosyllabic, she would take the hint and leave him alone. He could at least try. There was not much else he could do, after all.

She moved a little closer, looking up at him through long eyelashes. “You may simply call me Dorothy, Lord Vaughan, if you wish.” Her voice was soft, almost purring, and he imagined that she considered herself to be very alluring in her manner towards him. She would not imagine for a moment that her presence was causing him such discomfort, such distaste.

He recoiled, though, and took a step back. “I do not think that such familiarity is appropriate between us, Lady Dorothy.”

She laughed, a rather harsh sound that had not the slightest hint of joy in it. “My Lord, as you well know, our fathers have been discussing our engagement. I think we are allowed a little familiarity, do you not?”

He stood up straight, to his full height, which he knew was impressive, and squared his broad shoulders. She was not a tall young lady, and he rather hoped that their difference in height might intimidate her slightly. Not too much, but enough for her to stop this topic of conversation once and for all.

He cleared his throat. “You are mistaken, Lady Dorothy. I have agreed to nothing, and neither do I intend to.”

She fluttered her eyelashes again. “Normally it is the young lady who is coy, My Lord, but I can see that you are toying with me.” She tossed her dark brown hair over her shoulder and looked at him archly. “I know that my father very much desires a union between our two families, and your father does too. Do you not think that it could be a glorious success?”

Michael bit his lip, the anger boiling up inside him again. How dare these people think that they could decide his future for him? He wanted to tell her straight, there and then, that he despised her, and that he would never marry her, but he knew he could not say such a thing here, where other people might overhear them. He could not even raise his voice without drawing attention to them. The least bit thing could cause a scandal.

Instead, he moved a little closer to her and held her gaze. “You must not talk like that, My Lady. Nothing is decided, and nor will it ever be. I demand that you stop speaking as if there is anything settled between us.”

She laughed again and tossed her head in the most infuriating manner, like a badly trained horse who would not succumb to the bridle. “I shall do no such thing, Lord Vaughan,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes at him again.

There was a devious look in her eyes that Michael did not like, and a sinking feeling swept over him as she turned on her heel and walked away triumphantly. He felt that the conversation had not gone the way he wanted it to, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

He turned towards his friend, who had been standing a little distance away from them for the duration of the conversation. Levi had at least had the decency not to eavesdrop on the whole mortifying exchange.

“Heathmile,” Michael said, trying to get his attention.

Levi seemed to be looking at something in the distance, with a rather strange expression on his face.

“Heathmile!” Michael said again, more sharply. “Man, what is the matter with you? You look like you are in some sort of a

dream.”

Levi blinked and turned to face him. “Oh, sorry, I was... Never mind.” He paused and looked around. “She’s gone, then? Lady Dorothy?”

Michael nodded. “At last!”

“She is a rather determined young lady, isn’t she?” Levi observed wryly. “I’m not quite sure how you’re going to get out of it, you know.”

Michael felt a muscle in his jaw twitching, as the feelings of anger began to surface again. “I will not marry her,” he said flatly. “It is not a question of getting out of it, there is nothing to get out of.”

Levi shrugged. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“Indeed,” Michael said. He suddenly felt hot and enclosed, here in the ballroom, which was becoming busier and busier by the minute. He craved some fresh air. “I am going outside,” he declared abruptly. “Alone,” he added, just in case Levi thought he was interested in his company.

He knew he was being a little rude as he turned and stalked across the room towards a doorway which he knew led to the terrace, and out to the gardens. But he could stand it no longer. He desperately needed to clear his head, and the only way that he could do that was by getting some air and being alone for a while.



Constance crossed the room, biting her lips to prevent the tears from falling. Once she was with Catherine and the rest of her family, she would be fine, but this long walk back from the dance floor through the crowded ballroom was pure torture. She could feel the eyes of everyone on her, or at least that was how it felt. Her cheeks were burning, and her heart was pounding in her chest.

The Earl of Riversdale had asked her to dance, and finally, she had felt a flutter of hope as she followed him to the dance

floor. He was not the most handsome gentleman she had ever seen in her life, truth be told, but he was pleasant looking, with red hair and a nice smile. And he had seemed rather nervous when he had asked her, which she had always found endearing.

The dance was a traditional country dance, which left plenty of time for talking in between sets, whilst other couples made their way down the dance, and Constance had hoped for a chance to get to know the gentleman better. She had hoped that he would try to make conversation with her and ask her questions about herself. But there had been nothing. He had almost looked disappointed by the time the dance had ended, but Constance had no idea why. What on earth was she doing wrong?

He had taken his leave from her almost before the final notes of the music had ended, obviously having no desire to stay and chat with her, or fetch her a drink, or in fact do anything that might further their acquaintance. It seemed to Constance that he could not get away from her fast enough. And even though she was not especially enamored with him, it cut her to the quick that he did not want to spend any more time with her.

A wave of despair swept through her as she took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and took a gulp. The Earl was the only gentleman who had asked her to dance all evening, and it had been a disaster. No other man present had looked at her twice. It felt as if there was no hope for her. Was she really destined to be alone forever?

When she reached her family, she knew that she could not linger with them for long. Catherine was glowing, her cheeks flushed from yet another dance with a promising young man, and Neil was looking on fondly as she chatted with him. She made it look so easy! And yet, for Constance, it seemed like the hardest thing in the world, to stand with a gentleman and for the conversation between them to flow smoothly, like a river with no obstacles. For her, it felt like wading through a swamp and never reaching the other side.

She nodded to her sister, then said, "I am going to take some air. You must not trouble yourself to join me, dearest." Seeing

the look of concern crossing Catherine's face, she added, "I am quite well, do not worry!" She hoped that she sounded convincing.

She swallowed down the sob that was growing in her throat and turned away, heading towards the doors that led outside. She would be fine once she had had a moment to herself.

That was all she needed, a moment's peace to gather her thoughts. Then, she could face the ballroom again.

CHAPTER THREE



Michael took a deep breath and felt the cool evening air filling his lungs. He had been right to come outside.

Instantly, he felt calmer. Darkness was only just beginning to fall; it was midsummer, so the evenings were long. There was a pleasant floral scent in the garden. He could not name it – flowers were not something he had ever been particularly interested in – but he enjoyed it all the same.

He walked along the edge of a large ornamental hedge and was just trying to decide whether to carry on walking further into the shrubbery or to turn back and return to the ball when he heard a noise behind him.

He whirled around, the sense of calm that he had been so carefully cultivating evaporating immediately. He could not think who else would be out here in the creeping dusk, but he had a sense that whoever the person was, they were up to no good.

He stood still and listened, trying to work out where the noise had come from. He heard another rustle from a clump of trees, and he walked towards the noise. In his experience, the best way to handle trouble was to face it head-on, and he had no doubt that this time would be no different.

A figure emerged through the trees and he saw they were wearing a gown; it must be a lady. What on earth would a young lady be doing out here alone in the dark? His heart sank as the figure came closer, and he realized who it was. Lady Dorothy.

“What are you doing out here?” he hissed.

He looked around frantically, checking that there was no one else around. They could not be seen out here together. Everyone would assume it was a secret tryst, and then... well, he couldn't bear thinking about what would happen next.

Dorothy merely let out a giggle and came closer.

He felt the anger beginning to build up inside him. She really was incorrigible.

“Why are you following me?” he demanded. Because of course, she must be following him. It could not be a coincidence that she was out here at exactly the same time as him.

What was she playing at?

She moved even closer. “Of course, I am not following you, Lord Vaughan. But since we happen to find ourselves out here alone...,” she whispered. “Out here, in the darkness, with no one around to overhear us, we can speak our true minds.”

“There is nothing to say!” he retorted. “You are deluding yourself, Lady Dorothy. Please, go back inside.”

She shook her head. “I would prefer to stay out here. The evening air is so pleasant, don't you think?”

He said nothing but simply glared at her. Why wouldn't she take the hint and leave him alone?

“I thought, My Lord, that some time alone would be a good thing for us. There is so much to discuss, about our forthcoming engagement, and nuptials...”

He winced. How could she be so obtuse to continue talking about their wedding as if it was certain to happen? Regardless of all that, though, they could not stay out here alone.

“Lady Dorothy, please, you must go inside. We cannot be seen out here together, alone. There would be a scandal.”

She gave a little gasp, her hand flying to her mouth. “A scandal? We cannot have that, can we?!” She held his gaze, with that devious look in her eye that he had noticed before.

“You have done this on purpose!”

Everything fell into place. This was no accident. She had manufactured the whole situation, and now, his reputation and future were at risk, just as much as hers.

She shrugged. “If there is a scandal, then we will simply have to bring the wedding forward, that is all.”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” he said, his voice coming out as a low growl. “I will not marry you. There will be no wedding.”

Dorothy stared back at him boldly. “There *will* be if anyone finds us out here.” She giggled, and Michael was even more certain that she had planned the whole thing.

Michael felt the blood rising up in him again, as his anger took over. “You are trying to trap me!” He could not stop himself from raising his voice, even though he knew that it was unwise, especially given the perilous situation he now found himself in. “You are trying to ensure that there is a scandal so I will be forced to marry you!”

She giggled again. The tinkling sound infuriated him even further. “My Lord, fate has brought us together, that is all. I was simply out here enjoying the fresh air, and along you came.”

But Michael did not believe her for a moment.

“You are lying,” he said softly.

He had to get away from her, that was the only way to avoid disaster. He looked behind him to check that the coast was clear. It was his intention, then, to turn away and head back to the house as quickly as possible, and pray that no one had seen them, but before he could even start to walk away, he heard another rustling sound in the bushes close by.

His stomach dropped. Someone was there. They had been seen, and maybe even heard. The situation was disastrous.

On impulse, he followed his initial instincts and began to walk away as quickly as he could. But he heard footsteps behind

him, and when he turned around, he could see that Dorothy was following him.

Wretched woman! Why wouldn't she leave him alone?

He picked up his pace. The only thing that he could do now was to get as far away as possible from her. She was trouble, there was no doubt about it.

He rounded the corner of a long row of shrubbery and suddenly felt himself crashing into something with a thud. In the darkness, he could not tell exactly what it was for a moment until the thing gave a gasp. He reached out and felt the form in front of him crumple. He braced his body, taking the full weight of the person into his arms, for he now realized that it was a figure that he had collided with.

It was almost dark outside now, but a shaft of moonlight fell through the clouds and allowed him to see that it was a lady now in his arms, and he had caught her just in time before she fell to the ground. Her eyes were closed, and she appeared to be in a faint, as she had gone limp and unresponsive in his arms.

He looked in all directions to see if anyone else was around, but he could see no one. He was not sure what to do, but in the absence of any other ideas, he decided to lay the lady down on the grass while he tried to work out what to do next.

At that moment, he heard yet more rustling in the bushes. He let out a sigh of exasperation. Who else could be out here? He already had one unconscious young lady to deal with, as well as Dorothy, wherever she was.

His heart sank even further when he saw a pair of young ladies emerging from the gap between the trees on the other side of the grassy lawn where he had laid the unknown lady. He recognized them vaguely, although he could not remember their names. When a third lady stepped into the light and he saw that it was Dorothy, he realized that the others were her friends, young ladies whom he had previously seen gathered around her at various balls and parties over the last couple of years, before he had gone away on his travels. She had brought

a gaggle of supporters, then, for her planned assault on his freedom and his very sanity.

“Lord Vaughan,” one of the young ladies said with a simper, “we wondered what you were doing out here alone with Dorothy.”

Dorothy held back, standing in the shadows. Michael wondered if this was all part of the ruse. Had she lined them up, ready to emerge from the trees and discover them? He looked down again at the young lady lying on the grass. Surely she could not also be part of the plan? The whole situation was rather baffling, and he was becoming rather concerned that the lady had not yet recovered from her faint.

Michael stayed quiet. He felt sure that anything he said could make a difficult situation even worse.

The other young lady, next to the one who had spoken, looked a little uncomfortable. “Emma, do you not think that we should start to make a noise, to attract attention?” she whispered.

Michael bit back a snigger; she clearly thought she was being discreet, but he could hear every word she said. He thought, now, upon looking at her more closely, that her name was Jane, although he could not remember her family name.

Emma looked at Dorothy and frowned. “I am not sure... I think that since this other... person... is here... the moment is lost? And we do not want Dorothy to be harmed by any scandal.”

Michael smiled in the darkness. They were beginning to see sense, at last. He moved a little closer and rose from his crouching position to his feet. It was time to take control of the situation.

“Miss Jane, Miss Emma, I think that we must carry this young lady indoors, now,” he said. “Enough of this ruse, or whatever it was that you have been planning.”

He threw a look at Dorothy in the darkness, knowing that she probably could not see his face clearly, but feeling better even so. In all earnestness, though, he was becoming concerned

about this young lady in front of him, lying motionless on the ground. He wished that he knew who she was.

“You are right, of course, Lord Vaughan,” the lady named Emma said, smiling innocently at him.

It was almost as if neither of them could remember taking part in Dorothy’s deceit, and now they were pretending to be innocent bystanders who had nothing to do with its inception.

Michael nodded briskly and crouched down, bracing himself as he picked the lady up and began to walk towards the house. How he was going to explain his presence in the gardens or the presence of this mysterious lady, he was not sure. But taking her inside was the right thing to do.

The ladies followed, with Dorothy bringing up the rear. When Michael glanced over his shoulder to check that they were all coming back into the house – he did not like the thought of any of them remaining outside on their own – he saw that Dorothy’s face was like thunder. He realized that she must be fuming that her plan had not come to fruition.

With a slight shrug to himself, Michael dismissed the thought. It had been a lucky escape.

As he neared the doorway that would take them back into the ballroom, he felt the lady stirring in his arms. He paused for a moment and looked at her face, now illuminated by the lanterns that were lit on the terrace. Although pale, she was beautiful, with dark blonde hair falling around her face. To his surprise, she opened her eyes and looked right at him, and then, a fraction of a second later, she winked.

He stopped in his tracks and stared at her, but she closed her eyes again immediately, her face impassive. Had she been pretending to be in a faint all this time? What on earth could it mean?

Slowly, everything fell into place. This lady must have heard his conversation with Dorothy and pretended to faint, to cause a distraction, or to save him from the trap that Dorothy was trying to set for him. He could not help but smile at not only her ingenuity but her kindness, too. She had saved him from a

terrible situation, and he felt a surge of relief coursing through his body.

He had no idea, though, why she had helped him. He wished, once again, that he at least knew the young lady's name.

Behind him, Emma, Jane, and Dorothy had caught up with him.

"Lord Vaughan, is everything all right?" Dorothy asked. He sensed that she was speaking through gritted teeth, her irritation seeping through her voice as she spoke.

"Indeed," he said. Before he turned to face her, he checked once more that the young lady in his arms had her eyes closed again. "Pray, do any of you know this young lady's name? I am not sure how we will go about finding her friends and family if we do not know who she is."

Miss Emma stepped close. "Why, I do believe it is Lady Constance Windham," she declared. "I cannot imagine why she would have been walking about the gardens by herself in the dark!"

Michael wondered, too, but said nothing.

"Do you think she is all right, My Lord?" Jane asked, staring at him intently. "You do not think she is in any danger?"

Michael suppressed a smile, knowing as he did that the whole fainting episode had been a ruse. "I think that she is not in any danger," he responded. "But it would be just as well to return her to her family, now, and get her out of the evening air before the chill sets in."

He turned away from the gaggle of young ladies and walked purposefully through the doors and into the ballroom, intent now on returning Lady Constance to the heart of her family.

Want to know how the story ends?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In case you love free books, you will find one that Hazel never published on Amazon. A gift to her followers! You can find it on her real Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/hazellinwoodauthor>.

Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

Embark on this journey of desire, decorum and intense love of Regency England. Let Hazel transport you into an era of pure, sincere love and charming lords that will take your breath away!

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